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"SIMPLIFY ME WHEN I'M DEAD"
THE LIFE AND POETRY OF KEITH DOUGLAS

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
of the Degree of**

Master of Arts

by

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Chapter 1

The Life of Keith Castellain Douglas January 1920 - June 1944

Poetry is like a man, whom thinking you know all his movements and appearance you will presently come upon in such a posture that for a moment you can hardly believe it a position of the limbs you know.
(Keith Douglas "On the Nature of Poetry" *Augury*, 1940)¹

Keith Douglas's letters, prose, and poetry reveal a highly complex and contradictory personality in a man of diverse talents, interests, and loyalties. Douglas himself attempted to explain his conflicting tendencies through description of a dark and always elusive alter ego he came to refer to as the "bête noire." Near the end of his life he made several attempts to write a poem about this "black beast," sometimes referring to these "Bête Noire fragments," as they are now commonly called, as "the poem I can't write" (PM 120). Douglas also planned to call a collection of his poems *Bête Noire*, but was killed before publication. The paradoxical qualities of Douglas inform all of his poetry in one way or another and should therefore be a central concern when presenting his life and thoughts. He thrived on order and ceremony, yet consistently defied authority; he is variously characterized as a "snob" (WS 209)² and as "incapable of a mean act" (Fraser 223). He was sometimes incredibly romantic in his notions of love, yet denied the emotional vulnerability that his passion inevitably manifested. The contradictions in his personality are thus what I most wish to emphasize in the biographical review that follows.

Douglas was killed at the age of twenty-four. Because of his early death, it is possible to review the events of his life in a brief discussion. A rudimentary knowledge of his childhood becomes critical to an understanding of the trajectory of his poetic maturation because the majority of his poems can rightly be considered juvenilia. This biographical review moves quickly through his early home life and the time he spent in boarding schools, then summarizes the activities and concerns of his Oxford days. Lastly

I will outline the period in which he did his most mature work. This period, dating from roughly 1940 until his death, corresponds with his military service as an army officer in the Second World War

In one of his last Oxford poems, before leaving England in 1941 to serve as a tank commander in North Africa, Douglas requested:

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

His tone in this couplet and the rest of the poem only hints that we may hear irony in his plea. At times, Keith Douglas probably did wish to be simplified. He suffered from the constant feeling of having "a beast on [his] back" (from the *Bête Noire* fragments) and wanted to be released from its clutches in death because he could not escape it through the futile love relationships he pursued in life. At other times, Douglas would have found it dishonest to simplify that which was in fact complex and insoluble. When read ironically, his request becomes a plea *not* to destroy the subtlety and nuance of a man by memorializing him with clichés and convenient reductive labels. What comes through clearly in either reading is his wish to be judged fairly, on merit only, by those who knew his many faces and talents.

Keith Castellain Douglas was born on 24 January 1920 at Tunbridge Wells during the time between his father's two stints on active duty as an army officer. His father, Keith Sholto Douglas, known after his service with the Royal Engineers as Captain Douglas, was an engineer by training even before volunteering for service immediately upon the outbreak of the First World War. Two months after volunteering, Keith Senior was commissioned in the Royal Engineers and married Marie Josephine Castellain before being sent to Gallipoli in 1915. He earned the Military Cross during a bridging operation while under fire, suffered malaria and sandfly fever, and received a minor bullet wound (*KD 2*).

While her husband was away during the First World War, Marie Douglas did secretarial work for the artist Lawson Wood, who was also occupied at the front. Although she had only six months of formal education, she soon found herself writing stories for the children's books that Wood was commissioned to illustrate. This work provided a sustenance but ended soon after the war.

After his discharge in 1919, Captain Douglas was home for a brief period in which his son was born, but he had difficulty finding permanent work. He also missed the military life and gladly returned to active duty for 17 months during the beginning of the Irish Civil War. During her husband's absence, Marie Douglas and her son stayed with her parents. Thus the only male influence on the young Keith Douglas at this time was his eighty-year-old grandfather, Charles Castellain, the "Grandson of a French aristocrat from Lille who had fled the revolution" (*KD* 3). When Marie needed to work to supplement their meager income, grandfather Castellain looked after the child, taking him on instructive daily walks and reading or telling stories, sometimes of his own childhood.

Returning home again, Captain Douglas spent the family's savings to buy a small acreage, "Dalkeith," Avenue Road, Cranleigh, and built a chicken farm. Although this enterprise quickly captured the local market, Keith Senior had little patience for its day-to-day operation and the business stagnated due to neglect of its more mundane needs and over-investment in expansion and improvements.

Captain Douglas was well intentioned and fond of his son. This fondness was apparently reciprocated, as Desmond Graham's biography of Douglas illustrates:

Within twelve months Keith's allegiance was proved by his adoption of military dress. With a cap given to him by a man down the road, a row of military buttons, puttees, and a medal made by himself out of a half-penny, he patrolled the garden, challenging all who passed (*KD* 5).³

Another biographer, William Scammell, shows that the young Douglas also exhibited an early interest in "art and literature":

From an early date, his mother later wrote, 'Keith showed interest in art. First shapes interested him. Then words. (He started to draw things at two years old.)

Always very independent, he usually spurned advise till his own mistakes had proved him wrong. . . . He "talked" stories to his various toys till he learned to write and then he attempted to write them. He drew on every available scrap of paper; on doors and walls and any soft flat surface he could find in the garden which he could scrape with a stick. He pored over books he couldn't possibly read, comparing shapes of words he knew with the shapes he didn't know and trying to guess their meaning' (Quoted from *Collected Poems* ed. Waller, Fraser, and Hall, 13, in WS, 1).⁴

All the duties of the chicken farm except construction fell to Marie Douglas with only the assistance of a young girl Olwen (*KD* 5). The strain of her multiple roles--laborer, accountant, distributor, mother, and domestic--led to a breakdown and doctors discovered that Marie suffered from *encephalitis lethargica*, a then common ailment more widely known as "sleeping sickness." Douglas was nearly five years old at the time of her collapse, which he recounted later in an autobiographical story of the childhood of "Keir":

He went and peered out, and saw through the bannisters a group of people standing in the hall, about his mother, who lay asleep on a stretcher or as it seemed to Keir a funny sort of bed. He realised almost at once that his mother was ill and ran downstairs on his bare feet asking what was the matter with her, as they took her away out the front door. Someone he had never seen took him back to his bed with some unsatisfactory explanation, and locked the door on him. He began immediately to scream and beat upon it, but they had all gone and he was alone, locked in. He became frantic, fell on the floor and shouted curses he had heard 'curse damn bother darn bloody' in a string as long as he could put together, until he got up from the floor and hit his head on the door knob. It hurt and with some idea of punishing the door knob he hit his head on it five or six times more, very hard, and then subsided on the bed sobbing. (*PM* 15-16).⁵

Marie Douglas stayed in a hospital for months and the total recovery took years. Meanwhile, without her efforts the chicken farm failed and was sold, mainly to pay debts. Her illness and financial difficulties put a strain on the marriage, which made it preferable to find young Douglas a different environment, one which would be more stable while providing a chance for proper education. With a loan from friends to cover the cost, he was sent, in September of 1926, to the Edgeborough boarding school in Guildford. He fit in immediately and had no trouble adjusting to the new routine of institutional life. School soon became a substitute home.⁶

While Douglas was away at school, his father found work in Wales. In 1928, when Captain Douglas returned for his father's funeral, he asked his wife for a divorce so he could marry Olwen, the young woman who had helped with the chicken farm and who had acted as a playmate to Douglas. Though Captain Douglas had visited Olwen on a previous return from Wales, information given by Desmond Graham does not suggest that Captain Douglas had been unfaithful to his wife prior to her illness or even prior to his departure. Captain Douglas gave a small sum of money to Marie when he received his inheritance. There was no other effort to provide financial or emotional support during Douglas's childhood and at the age of eight years, Douglas probably saw his father for the last time(*CP* xiii). Captain Douglas wrote to his son in 1938, before Douglas was to enter Oxford, suggesting that they meet, but Douglas ignored the letter (*KD* 26n).

Douglas remained at Edgeborough school until being accepted into Christ's Hospital for the fall term of 1931 (WS 4). Through examination and good fortune he had been allowed entrance to the prestigious public school "for those without money," the alma mater of Coleridge, Lamb, Leigh Hunt, and Edmund Blunden (*KD* 21). At Christ's Hospital, Douglas did not adjust as quickly as he had at Edgeborough. Graham explains that Douglas "spent much of his first days wandering from room to room carrying out inexplicable commands His experience was not unique . . . but he was in a situation which encouraged one desire: to conform" (*KD* 20). Graham makes clear that this treatment was nothing more than the usual harassment experienced by newcomers.

Whenever he put forth the effort, which was not all the time, Douglas distinguished himself in art, sports, acting, and most importantly, academics. His teachers remember an often bored and sometimes contemptuous student who nonetheless usually received high marks. He was also committed to the school's Officer Training Corps and made elaborate preparations for drill and parades.⁷

At fourteen, Douglas published his first poems in the school magazine, *The Outlook*. His earliest poems are dense with pastoral images and the fairies of his grandfather's stories. By the time he was fifteen, Graham notes, Douglas's poetry had begun its first transformation. Graham refers to two poems from about 1935, "Youth" and "Strange Gardener." Both retain some pastoral imagery, but Graham correctly perceives the additional elements of darkness and time. Douglas's verse continued to change and only occasionally returned to simpler forms and brighter topics.

During a school holiday in 1935, Douglas traveled for the first time--a visit to his mother's half-sister in Gorizia, a border town between Italy and Yugoslavia(*KD* 30). The experience was reflected in the imagery of his later juvenilia, and provided his first exposure to life outside educational institutions. The remainder of Douglas's career at Christ's Hospital was not without difficulties, including several conflicts with authority and one near expulsion.⁸ It was also during this time that Douglas began to pursue the romantic relationships which became important for the maturation of his poetry.⁹

In 1938, Douglas went up to Oxford, having been awarded an Open Exhibition in history at Merton College.¹⁰ After arriving he exercised the option of transferring to a course of study in English and began reading under Edmund Blunden. Graham describes the Oxford social cliques as split along a line between the "aesthetic and the hearty," with Douglas refusing categorization in either group. He remained unique and difficult to know, dressed dashingly but unconventionally, accepted many visitors to his ground-floor room but sometimes paid little attention to them, wrote poetry but never sought membership in the poetic circles. He was always drawing and painting, with his works hung on the walls and strewn about the floor of his room. As at Christ's Hospital, he joined the Officer Training Corps, played rugby, and befriended many, including Hamo Sassoone, nephew of Siegfried Sassoone.¹¹

In February of 1939, Douglas met Yingcheng, the westernized daughter of a former Chinese Ambassador to Washington, and became obsessed with his feelings for her. This

attachment and the growing likelihood of war clouded Douglas's spring term; he began to appear restless and bored and often left his work undone (*KD* 65-76).¹² He spent a week in Paris with Yingcheng in late June. After a falling out, she departed for Bermuda but answered his letters during the summer--to avoid hurting him, she later said.

The fall term had not yet begun and Douglas was still with his mother when on September 3, 1939, Britain declared war on Germany. Stephen Hearst remembers sitting on a lawn in Kent with Douglas after hearing the news.¹³ Neither said a word as they stared thoughtfully out at the countryside. Douglas returned to Oxford the next day.

Three days after the declaration of war, Douglas reported to a Reception Unit to enlist in the "Cavalry of the Line." Later that day he proclaimed that he would "bloody well make my mark in this war. For I will not come back." Again that evening, when passing a memorial of the First World War, he stated that his name would appear on the next war memorial (*KD* 79). Earlier that same day, September 6, Douglas had learned that Yingcheng was to be married, the news coming from an attendant at the garage where Yingcheng had left her car for the summer (*KD* 78-79).

Douglas was not called up immediately and remained at Oxford for nearly a year. This period of anticipation was difficult for him. Graham tells of one incident which illustrates his deep ambivalence and complicates the image of enthusiastic militarist that so many people see behind the author of *Alamein to Zem Zem*, Douglas's narrative of the Desert War:

Cant infuriated him, but to hear cant about the war in which he would participate and in which he was convinced he would be killed had an irony which he could not tolerate. In his first *Cherwell* editorial, he had attacked those who believed "that we are fighting a race of sub-men, of whom every member from birth is certainly a brutal moron." In this summer term, David Beaty recalls being at the cinema with Douglas when they witnessed the usual newsreel in which an aerial dogfight was concluded with the German plane spinning to the ground in flames. The audience cheered. Even in the semi-darkness of the cinema Beaty could see that Douglas was trembling with rage. He climbed onto his seat, shouting at the audience, "You shits! You shits! You shits!" until he was forcibly removed by the doorman (*KD* 100).

This last unsettled year at Oxford was, from a creative standpoint, undoubtedly his most productive. With Blunden and Alec Hardie, Douglas spent the fall term editing *Augury: An Oxford Miscellany of Verse and Prose*, published by Basil Blackwood in 1940. Douglas included four of his own poems "Villanelle of Spring Bells," "Stars," "*Pas de Trois*," and "Haydn--Military Symphony." Consistent with the "anti-militaristic, anti-serious" nature of the publication, these poems were, as the editors admitted, "not with the times, but in most of their thoughts they hark back or forward to a better age" (*KD* 85). In early 1940 Douglas also published some poetry in *The Cherwell*, which he was editing at the time, including "A Round Number," "Stranger," and a translation of Horace's fifth ode from the first book. As Graham points out, the loss of Yingcheng still weighed heavily in his poetry and moods.

Douglas did enter into other romances during this period, in particular with Antoinette, a younger friend of Yingcheng.¹⁴ In answer to his friends' doubts about this rebound relationship, Douglas said, "I have never till now been so utterly carried away with love, and yet able to consider difficulties and disadvantages quite coldly" (*KD* 82). Graham sums up one of Douglas's letters to Antoinette:

He wrote of himself as 'made up of two very different parts: I'm almost two people.' One wanted 'exoticism, travel, adventure'; it had a 'terror of perishing into an ordinary existence,' and wanted 'an ideal companion in these adventures.' . . . The other part was 'tired of fighting, wants to be settled, to have a real aim for the rest of my life'; and it too wanted a companion 'to whom I can give all my love without fear of being hurt, who will need my protection and consideration' (*KD* 84).

The relationship itself is not as important as Douglas's remarks, which again reinforce my contention that Douglas assumed a detached perspective almost instinctively, yet remained emotionally invested and was always conscious of his narrative point of view. These remarks about himself form an answer to some of his detractors, who judge the frequently detached sound of his poetic voice as simply indicative of the emotional coldness of his character.¹⁵

When young men go off to war, they often leave their most valued possessions with someone. A loyal dog is placed in the care of a younger brother, a favorite trinket entrusted to a relative, a future life promised to a young lover. In July 1940, Douglas left a collection of his poems with Edmund Blunden before entering initial training at Army Equitation School, the Third Horsed Cavalry Training Regiment. Douglas's class trained for two months with horses, the last group to do so, before moving on to Sandhurst and mechanized training at the Royal Military College.¹⁶ Douglas had excelled at Equitation School, but apparently the glamour of ancient traditions was absent from mechanized training and he became disenchanted without his "handsome chromium plated sword to play with" (*KD* 109). He began writing again at Sandhurst and continued after moving with his regiment to Wickwar in March 1941. He wrote "Song," "The House," "Time Eating," and "The Prisoner." The last two poems could be considered to indicate that Douglas's style was evolving. He probably wrote "Simplify me when I'm dead" (*CP* 74), his last poem before leaving England for the Middle East, in May, and by 25 June was enroute to the Middle East.

He enjoyed the voyage to Egypt by way of Durban and Suez, and had ample time before being posted to his new unit to become acquainted with Cairo, which plays a major role in the imagery and contrasts of his wartime poetry. His posting was further delayed by his contracting *otitis media* in Cairo and being sent to Palestine for treatment. A period of convalescence allowed more time for poetry.

In late October, Douglas joined the Sherwood Rangers (Nottinghamshire Yeomanry), still in Palestine. In December, Douglas was able to travel to Syria, the inspiration for more poetry. Douglas's regiment was suspended halfway through the transition to mechanization, unburdened of the horses Douglas loved, but not yet equipped with the tanks and armored vehicles he was trained to operate. Temporary relief from the boredom of his inactive regiment came with the new year when he was sent to a special camouflage course near Cairo. On one trip into the city, Douglas had his first personal

experience with death. He recounts the incident in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, but more interestingly--and flippantly--in the second-to-last paragraph of an otherwise routine letter to Blunden:

I had an accident last time I was in Cairo and killed an Arab--he did the usual chicken-crossing-the-road stunt, at the double, from behind a stationary vehicle. I was exonerated but somewhat shaken. It is curious how doll-like a broken up body looks, in spite of blood. A pity it's not so odourless as a doll (PM 88-89).

Perhaps Douglas is covering much deeper emotions here, or even putting on a brave and ironic face for his Great War mentor. His blend of pity and frivolity again shows either denial or detachment, characteristic of his later imagery of dead bodies in the desert landscape. In much of his correspondence, Douglas uses understatement, alternately as a comedic device or as an easy way to dismiss his own sentimentality. Here his language seems a troubling mix of these two uses.¹⁷

His newly gained expertise in camouflage made Douglas an attractive candidate for transfer, against his will, to headquarters. A new job as Camouflage Staff Officer at Tenth Armoured Division in Palestine turned out to be non-existent, except, of course, on paper. After unsuccessfully attempting to be reassigned to his former unit, Douglas settled into this new job and used its excess of spare time to pursue other interests, including trips to Cairo, often by Royal Air Force trainer airplanes that made the trip regularly. From these flights Douglas developed a bird's eye perspective, which if it does not appear in the imagery of his poetry¹⁸, at least allows him a more encompassing view of the contrasts between Cairo and the battlefield in poems like "Dead Men" and "Cairo Jag." It was also during this time at HQ that Douglas met Olga Meiersens, an independent Latvian-Jewish woman working at a book shop in Palestine (WS 12). She would remain his friend and confidant, and perhaps his lover, throughout other romances that could be better classified as infatuations or wartime love affairs.

Division Headquarters moved to Cairo in late May, which put Olga at a distance but carried with it the advantages of the city. Cairo was an exile literary community at the time and Douglas already knew some of its members from Oxford.¹⁹ Though he did not

actively join any of the literary circles, he soon published work in David Hicks's monthly, *Citadel*. A string of girlfriends apparently occupied Douglas's social life in Cairo, but he kept up a rather serious correspondence with Olga, writing sincerely about topics that he usually found difficult to broach without sarcasm.

After a short assignment in the desert, still acting as a staff officer, Douglas's camouflage job was moved to Alexandria. There he met and became engaged to Milena Pegna. Douglas was happy in Alexandria, writing two poems that were atypical of his poetry of that period: "Egyptian Sentry, Corniche, Alexandria" and "L'autobus," both relying on conventional description and urban scenery (*CP* 86-87). His next poem, "Devils," returned to more familiar themes and language. Douglas and Milena had ended their engagement. His poetry was reaching a new level of maturity just in time to meet his first experience of battle.

The Battle of Alamein began on 23 October with the now famous barrage, heard by Douglas from twenty miles behind the front lines. Douglas's former and future unit, the Sherwood Rangers, entered the battle with devastating results in the early hours of 24 October. "All the officers of A Squadron had been either killed, wounded, or lost their tanks" (*KD* 163). Three days later, Douglas took the action for which he is most famous: deserting *to the battle* from headquarters. He casually tells the story in *Alamein to Zem Zem*:

I decided, if there were no other means of going into action with my regiment, to run away from divisional headquarters in my truck, and report to my colonel. I thought vaguely that this might be straightened out later. To plan this was the natural result of having the sort of little boy mentality I still have. A little earlier, I might have wanted to run away and be a pirate. . . . If [the colonel] refused me I was determined not to come back to Division but to drive away down the coast road to Alexandria, and from there through Cairo and Ismailia and across the Sinai desert to Palestine, to amuse myself until I was caught and court-martialed (*Alamein to Zem Zem*, introduction).²⁰

There are at least three things any reader of Douglas's poetry should notice in this passage: first, his desire to join the battle. He begins *Alamein to Zem Zem* by pointing out that he hopes to write not as a soldier merely, but as a newcomer to "fighting." He

sees battle as a "test, which I was interested in passing."²¹ Second, Douglas, as always, steps back from the subject of the self in a way that is not merely self-conscious, but illustrates the puzzling circumstance of an educated and sensitive mind being swayed by the militaristic spirit of a "little boy." Finally, Douglas's backup plan, should his attempt to join his regiment fail, hints that he will be running back to Olga in Palestine to find the other side of the love-death duality that pervades his poetry.²²

Douglas's colonel welcomed him to the unit and immediately put him in charge of three tanks, the operation and tactics of which he was essentially ignorant. Within two days Douglas encountered fighting. His narrative of the desert war reflects a non-militant and largely aesthetic view of the action. Douglas's experience of battle was fairly typical: long periods of boredom punctuated by intense periods of violent and confusing action. The originality of Douglas's narrative lies in his ability to remove himself artistically from the otherwise emotionally charged scenes he describes, and to find a method of description that is neither technical, as in diagrammatical historical formulations of battle lines and troop movements, nor entirely confined to the self-involved perspective of the private soldier.

Near Wadi Zem Zem on January 15, 1943, Douglas was wounded when he walked into a trip wire which set off a series of three land mines, each releasing a canister of steel ball bearings into the air before exploding (*KD* 182).²³ Douglas escaped with relatively minor wounds and was evacuated to No. 1 General Hospital at El Ballah, Palestine, arriving the day after his twenty-third birthday, on 25 January. In the hospital, Douglas wrote his first war poems, and may have started the narrative, *Alamein to Zem Zem* (*CP* xix). After two and a half months in the hospital, Douglas was allowed two weeks of leave. He spent the first week in Tel Aviv with Olga and the second with Milena's family in Alexandria before returning to his regiment, now outside Enfidaville.

During his stay, Milena's family noticed a change in Douglas, as Desmond Graham reports: "There was no unease to his friendship with Milena and she recalls that he had gained not only his old vitality but a new assurance" (*KD* 196). This new self-assurance must have been from Douglas's reckoning that he had passed the test of battle and was now an initiate in the legacy of the war poets.

After a few months at a regimental base camp near Homs, Douglas was back in Cairo to visit Milena for a last time and to make himself known in the literary circles.²⁴ Having been introduced to the editors of *Personal Landscape* by Bernard Spencer, Douglas left copies of many of his war poems to be published later. G.S. Fraser, one of the editors²⁵, said, "his talk was all of burning tanks and roasting bodies. About fighting he said it was an experience he'd been glad to have but that he'd seen everything that was necessary. Everything else would be repetition" (*KD* 225). A final poem written in Cairo before his departure for England in November, "Behavior of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden," omitted battlefield concerns and remains a widely respected work.

The return of the regiment to England was in preparation for the upcoming invasion of Europe. Douglas was allowed three weeks leave, visiting his mother and friends at Oxford and celebrating the Christmas Holidays, before starting training for the new theater. During training he spent most of his spare time working on illustrations for *Alamein to Zem Zem* and arranging for its publication with Tambimuttu at *Poetry London*. This last creative rush seems ominous in hindsight, but actually showed an optimism about his chances for publication, if not about his chances of surviving the war. Douglas trained half-heartedly for the invasion, appearing preoccupied with literary concerns and resigned to his own mortality.²⁶ However, when he entered combat again on D-day he showed a renewed fighting spirit along with an increased capacity for compassion for his fellow soldiers. Douglas apparently felt a need to participate in the ordeal of the coming battle with his regiment.²⁷

On June 9, 1944, Douglas was killed by a mortar fragment while running between tanks to make a reconnaissance report. He would no doubt have been pleased by the irony that no mark was found on his body. In *Alamein to Zem Zem*, he had emphasized the calm, restful look of a dead Libyan soldier, with “no signs of violence”: “I thought of Rimbaud’s poem ‘Le Dormeur du Val’ but the last line: *Il a deux trous rouges au côté droit* was not applicable.”

Notes

1 Cited from *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, ed. Desmond Graham (Manchester: Carcanet, 1985) 44. The two existing biographical works on Keith Douglas complement each other, the second borrowing largely from the first. Desmond Graham published the definitive biography of Douglas in 1974 (*Keith Douglas: 1920-1944*, hereafter cited as *KD*). He added to this with *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany* in 1985 (hereafter cited as *PM*). The second biographical study is William Scammell's *Keith Douglas: A Study* (hereafter cited as *WS*), published in 1988. The latter blends criticism with biographical information in a no-nonsense review of Douglas's life, work, and critical history. Little else exists in the form of collected biographical evidence. Graham also edited *Complete Poems* (hereafter cited as *CP*), published in 1978. Unless otherwise noted, all citations of Douglas's poetry are from *CP*.

2 Taken from a comment on Douglas by the poet, and personal acquaintance, Roy Fuller, in *WS*, 209.

3 Douglas's enduring enthusiasm for the military life seems to have worn out by early 1944. The first stanza of his last poem, "On a Return from Egypt," ends: "here to exercise my *depleted fury*" (italics added). Despite this hint of cynicism, he still seems to have been resolved to complete the war. Ironically, he was more morbid than ever simply because he finally had something to look forward to following the war; his prospects of becoming a well-known poet looked brighter than ever, yet it was just this hope which seems to have made the coming battle for Europe more ominous. He ends this final poem: "I fear what I shall find" (*CP* 122).

4 As this parenthetical documentation makes obvious, many references are from secondary, or even tertiary sources. Regrettably this is necessary due to a lack of material readily available and the difficulty in acquiring some sources which are now out of print. Whenever possible the original source is cited from the annotation in the secondary reference, giving credit to both. When this becomes cumbersome, I will usually footnote instead of using the more convenient parenthetical documentation.

5 Desmond Graham uses this same passage from Douglas's story when recounting the illness of Marie Douglas.

6 Scammell observes of the older Douglas: "He functioned well in closed, hierarchical societies both because he had to, or go under, and because they provided him with a sort of family, and the family's twin possibilities of conformity and revolt" (*WS* 10).

7 Graham comments briefly in several places throughout the biography on friends reactions to Douglas's dedication to the Officers Training Corps and things military. One example: "A similar straightforwardness of approach [Graham refers here to Douglas's unique and effective manner of dealing with his 'swab' at Christ's Hospital, evidence of his natural potential for leadership] made Douglas's commitment to the Corps a puzzle to friends and masters alike. . . . But for practically everyone the Corps was at best a burden to be endured, and Douglas, a well-known rebel, was 'fanatically keen' on it, remembered by John Adams as devoting at least half his week to preparations for parade. His unmilitary friends questioned his behavior but Douglas responded with quiet assurance: as the school had a Corps, he explained, it ought to be an efficient fighting force" (*KD*,

37-38). This evidence and his realistic if somewhat overly serious rationalization appears consistent with statements made by Douglas even after he had seen combat and had become somewhat disaffected with the realities of war. (Cf. last paragraph of letter to J. C. Hall, 10 Aug 43; *PM*, 128 and paragraph 11 of "Poets in This War," May 1943; *PM*, 117.)

8 The trouble that nearly lead to Douglas's expulsion began with his stealing an old rifle from the school's OTC armory and taking it home to refurbish it during the Christmas holiday. Douglas was unaware that the War Office took inventory of the school armory every four years. He was caught with the rifle, and though he had merely cleaned and oiled the useless weapon, he was severely punished.

9 These romances motivated some of Douglas's best early poems: "Poor Mary," "Stranger," and "To a Lady on the Death of Her First Love," all falling solidly into the category of juvenilia and especially, "The Prisoner," a more accomplished poem, but still prior to Douglas's most advanced style.

10 Upon leaving Christ's Hospital, Douglas had discarded all his exercise books. His housemaster, H. R. Hornsby, spotted them in a wastebasket and rescued them. This says more than all the posthumous praise to confirm the captivating effect of Douglas's presence.

11 Sassoon's room was above Douglas's and they began a friendship, sharing interests and even spending an Easter vacation cycling in Europe together. Douglas's poems "Soissons" and "Soissons 1940" have their basis in this trip (*KD* 68, 74-75).

12 A close friend of Douglas at the time, Margaret Stanley-Wrench, remembers Douglas showing his boredom at lectures and appearing distracted by his troubles with Yingcheng and thoughts of the approaching war. The relationship with Yingcheng had initially been one of mutual attraction, but Douglas became serious far more quickly than Yingcheng and she lost interest when his insecurity became more obvious away from Oxford. Graham quotes Yingcheng remembering that he was 'not a very male man' when emotionally dependent on a woman. (*KD*, 78).

13 Mrs. Douglas often stayed with the Miles, a couple who had taken her in during her convalescence. Their friend, Stephen Hearst, remembered the scene and Douglas's reticence (*KD* 79).

14 Desmond Graham has a habit of omitting the family names of women Douglas addressed in his poetry.

15 These detractors include Ian Hamilton (see works cited), John Carey (*New Statesman*, 18 Nov 1966; *New Review*, Sept 1974), Roy Fuller (*Encounter*, Sept 1974), and Geoffrey Grigson (*Country Life*, 18 May 1978). Others are cited in chapter 2.

16 Graham notes that one of Douglas's instructors argued the relative merits of horses and tanks, then concluded that the horse 'remained superior because it was quieter' (*KD* 106). It was during a break in this training, due to being kicked by a horse, that Douglas wrote the poignant short story, *Death of a Horse* (*PM* 137-139).

17 A related incident occurred in the summer of 1942, when Douglas was posted at Alexandria. Against the convention that British officers not involve themselves in such matters, Douglas “gave evidence against the driver of an Egyptian army truck who had run over a boy” (*KD* 154).

18 This perspective is most obvious in “Landscape with Figures I,” which begins: “Perched on a great fall of air/a pilot or angel looking down/on some eccentric chart, the plain . . .” (*CP* 103).

19 “Lawrence Durrell, Bernard Spencer, and Robin Fedden had started the poetry magazine *Personal Landscape*, publishing its first number in January 1942. The contributors were mostly exiles from Greece and elsewhere on the Continent or civilians trapped in Egypt by the war: George Seferis, Elie Papadimitriou, Olivia Manning, Terence Tiller, Ruth Speirs, and Robert Liddell were among them” (*KD* 147). Among Douglas’s acquaintances were David Hicks, who let Douglas stay at his flat while in Cairo, and John Waller, later co-editor of the first “Collected Poems” edition of Douglas’s work.

20 This passage from *Alamein to Zem Zem* is cited from the excerpts in *The Norton Book of Modern War* (hereafter cited as *NBMW*). Ed. Paul Fussell. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991): 382-383.

21 Douglas felt a need to experience war as had the Great War poets he considered his predecessors, Owen, Rosenberg, Sassoon, Brooke, and of course Blunden. At the beginning of *Alamein to Zem Zem* he reflects: “To say I thought the battle of Alamein as an ordeal sounds pompous: but I did think of it as an important test, which I was interested in passing.” (*NBMW* 381) A test, it might be said, like those by which public school boys are initiated into their peer groups. Douglas felt the need to experience all that his public school elders, especially Blunden, of Christ’s Hospital and Merton College, had experienced in order to feel part of the family, *in* on the great secret of war.

22 G.S. Fraser extends the discussion of the Bête Noire and Douglas’s premonition of death into a comparison with the Freudian Death-Wish (Death drive) and the Jungian Shadow, claiming that Douglas, because he never came to grips with these obsessions, was never a fully integrated personality. (Fraser 222-23) It might also be suggested that because of his non-integrated personality (split personality), his poetry retains a tension between love and death, guilt and absolution, happy warrior and poet-protester which explains its appeal and success.

23 Typical of British war autobiography, Douglas’s own description of the event remains extremely matter-of-fact and he describes his immediate reaction as one of calm resignation, even delaying his self-protective dive to the ground after realizing he had walked into the trip wire.

24 Douglas returned a doll Milena had given him for good luck before going into battle, explaining that he didn’t think he would be returning to battle anytime soon. (*KD* 224).

25 G.S. Fraser was later a co-editor of two editions of Douglas’s *Collected Poems* (1951, 1966), as well as the 1966 edition of *Alamein to Zem Zem*. Douglas’s poetry was

also the topic of his 1956 Chatterton Lecture, reprinted in Fraser's own collection of essays (see works cited).

26 Fellow officers noticed Douglas sketching on his map board during practice maneuvers.

27 Before leaving Egypt in 1943, John Waller had offered him a safe job as a military journalist. He replied with hesitation:

If there seems to be any chance of going into action again I should probably want to go--not that I like action that much, but I don't see why my friends should get blown up while I drop out. On the other hand, if we're going to hang about, I shall be wanting a job, and if I am already out of it when the regiment departs I shall just try to get back. And if I don't get back I shan't worry, much. A conscience is a nuisance. I find most people in the regiment extremely stupid and boring. I hate fighting but if I stay behind I feel much worse. I have already been blown up once, but it didn't larn me, unfortunately (*KD* 224).

Douglas's need to participate in the suffering recalls Wilfred Owen's similar need to join his fellow men. Ironically, Owen's protest against the slaughter of so many innocent boys compelled him to remain at the front with them. Owen died during the last week of the war.

Chapter 2

Poetic Ideals and Critical Reception

In any case it takes a long time to get to know a poet properly, and years of argument and dogmatic statement about him may finally persuade you that neither you nor any reader in the world can ever properly get to know him, or any other poet.
(Keith Douglas, School exercise book, 1938, "On Getting to know a poet," *PM* 27)

This examination of criticism will begin by looking at the two examples of personal criticism offered to Douglas while he was writing, and will use these, along with fragments from his own prose and correspondence, to construct a description of his approach to poetry. Next, it briefly explores why Douglas was largely ignored for a decade and a half by all but personal acquaintances. Third, it reviews the increasingly favorable critical treatment of his poetry from Ted Hughes's unqualified commendation in the Introduction to his edition of Douglas's *Selected Poems* (1964) to present.¹

When Douglas left Oxford to begin military training in July 1940, he left a collection of poems with Edmund Blunden, hoping that his Tutor, who had praised them as "a most attractive series of poems" (*KD* 103), could find a way to get them published. Blunden, in a move that Douglas called "the whole silly business" because of his anxiety over the outcome, submitted them directly to T.S. Eliot (*KD* 110). Though Eliot did not offer to publish the poems, he said that he had read the collection "several times" with "continued interest":

My impression so far is that you have completed one phase which begins with the very accomplished juvenilia and that you have started on another which you have not yet mastered. Of the first phase I feel that, as might be expected, there is a certain musical monotony in the rhythms. That does not matter in itself because it is a good thing to go on doing one thing until you are sure that its use is exhausted. . . I think you have definitely an ear.

If you are still writing I should like to see something.

I am keeping the poems which Blunden gave me until I hear from you.

(quoted in *PM* 74-75.)

Though Douglas "cooed" about the attention in a letter to a girlfriend (*KD* 117), he confided honestly to Blunden, lamenting,

Do you take Eliot's letter (as I take his to me) as an excessively polite refusal to have anything to do with my efforts? I really think I give up--I may try to write a novel but I doubt it. As a poet I seem to lack the appropriately exotic style and don't really get on very well with the present rulers of poetic society (*PM* 75).

Douglas's expectations had been unrealistic, but his ego recovered and in time he was able to assimilate Eliot's advice and admit the shortcomings of his earlier work. Less than four months later he sent Eliot four more poems. Again Eliot replied, this time with substantial marginal comments and the encouragement that at least one, "Song," was "very nearly written" (*PM* 77). The extent and detail of these comments show Eliot had much more than a polite interest in Douglas's work, but still he did not offer publication. After his departure for Egypt, Douglas sent only one more poem to Eliot, of which there is no record of reply.

Throughout his time in the army, Douglas maintained a candid and argumentative correspondence with J.C. Hall. Hall and Douglas had been at Oxford together and Hall had first contacted him through Mrs. Douglas in September 1941 to ask if Douglas would join him and Alan Rook in submitting a volume of poetry to be published by John Lehmann. Though Lehmann eventually decided not to publish the book, Hall and Douglas kept in touch, each continually taking jabs at the other's style.²

We are able to reconstruct a rudimentary poetic manifesto of Keith Douglas from his remarks to Hall. Douglas writes in a letter to Hall in June 1943:

You have been making cutting remarks about my poems for so long I ought to retaliate but I haven't seen any of yours for a long time, except here and there. The nastiest and truest thing I can say is that you are getting too involved and precious, chiefly because you now find yourself in a backwater and have nothing to write about that is relevant. The same applied to me in pre-Alamein days and I reacted differently but if anything produced worse. With regards to your criticism of my stuff, I think you are beginning to condemn all that is not your own favorite brand, and are particularly anti *réportage* and extrospective (if the word exists) poetry--which seems to me the sort that has to be written just now, even if it is not attractive. Mother sent me some copies of female psycho-analyst reviews³ of my work which made me retch; and described that shit Spender's efforts (*PM* 121).

By situating himself firmly on the side opposed to subjective and introspective poetry (a self-portrait that should be challenged), Douglas defines his own intentions. Another

letter to Hall the same month, discussing the copy of their *Selected Poems* which he had finally received, gives further insight to Douglas's degree of self-consciousness and his intentional avoidance of overt sensitivity. He first accuses Hall of being "too affected," but carefully qualifies his meaning: "I don't want that you should lose the sensitiveness, or even some of it. But that you should be deeply affected, and yet not show it so much" (*PM* 122).

The best (and latest) explanation of Douglas's poetic approach came in August 1943. Douglas strikes back at Hall's latest derision of his work and summarizes much of his own development. The letter gives a synopsis of Douglas's approach to composition coincident with the time of his most mature poetry, and, of all his correspondence, this is the most often cited by critics. It is therefore essential to an understanding of subsequent dialogue on Douglas's poetry and prose.

Incidentally you say I fail as a poet, when you mean I fail as a lyricist. Only someone who is out of touch, by which I mean first hand touch, with what has happened outside England--and from a cultural point of view I wish it had affected English life more--could make that criticism. I am surprised you should still expect me to produce musical verse. A lyric form and a lyric approach will do even less good than a journalese approach to the subjects we have to discuss now. I don't know if you have come across the word Bullshit--it is an army word and signifies humbug and unnecessary detail. It symbolizes what I think must be got rid of--the mass of irrelevancies, of 'attitudes,' 'approaches,' propaganda, ivory towers, etc., that stands between us and our problems (*PM* 127).⁴

Douglas felt compelled to address practical topics of current concern. He saw no other responsible choice for poetic subject matter. He had little patience with escapist approaches, whether physical--avoiding the front line by staying behind the desk at headquarters--or literary--choosing themes for poetry that merely hint at the horrors of war or the loss of pastoral tranquillity. The stripped-to-essences reality of much of Douglas's poetry derives from his firm belief in the removal of irrelevancies. His use of "strong language," as Mark Goldman has noted, acts out the move away from his former lyrical voice.⁵ Douglas wanted to give his new war poetry the same vernacular thrust that the term "bullshit" carries, and his use of the "army word" confirms his desire to further

broaden the distinction between the home guard, including civilians, and the experienced front-line soldier.⁶ The "nightmare ground" of the battlefield is so entirely foreign that it cannot be described in conventional poetic terms and conceals its true nature in the absence of its attending vernacular:

To write on the themes which have been concerning me lately in lyrical and abstract forms, would be immense bullshitting. In my early poems I wrote lyrically, as an innocent, because I was an innocent: I have (not surprisingly) fallen from that particular grace since then (*PM* 127).

That Douglas had fallen from innocence "not surprisingly," seems to indicate that he felt he had fallen from more than an ignorance of war. The idealisms of the soldier, poet, and lover had been lost nearly simultaneously, causing a metamorphosis in the language of the poet, and giving a new clarity to the voice, a new conviction to the critic. Douglas wished to convey his sincere appraisal of death and suffering in war without the artificial constraints of a predetermined poetic language.

In the same paragraph of the Hall letter he borrows credibility for his self-analysis by invoking, in an apparently sincere manner, a more authoritative voice--T.S. Eliot's:

I had begun to change during my second year at Oxford. T.S. Eliot wrote to me when I first joined the army, that I appeared to have finished with one form of writing and to be progressing towards another, which he did not think I had mastered. I knew this to be true, without his saying it (*PM* 127).

In two sentences, Douglas not only records his agreement with Eliot, but admits his initial defensiveness towards the negative remarks of Eliot. Next, he preemptively defends the present imperfections in his rhythms and tone, then adds a statement that seems central to his poetic project but remains difficult to interpret:

Well, I am still changing: I don't disagree with you if you say I am awkward and not used to the new paces yet. But my object (and I don't give a damn about my duty as a poet) is to write true things, significant things in words each of which works for its place in a line. My rhythms, which you find enervated, are carefully chosen to enable the poems to be *read* as significant speech (*PM* 127).⁷

We might be tempted to emphasize Douglas's earnest desire to "write true things," but unless we know exactly what he means by "true," then we really aren't able to apply his intentions to our criticism of his poetry. What remains is a declaration that Douglas is

aiming for the sound of vernacular speech, but *significant* speech. I infer that Douglas means significant *vernacular* speech because of his previous assertion that he would like to avoid lyricism and remove irrelevancies. He seems to associate most of these irrelevancies with academic or at least "civilian" forms of speech along with, perhaps, the clichés of the few aristocrats who still inhabit the officer corps. His derision of the practitioners of worn-out nationalistic slogans echoes his explicit acknowledgment of the trench poets in his "Desert Flowers": "Rosenberg, I only repeat what you were saying." This warning against ideological love of country over love of life is one of the eternally echoing messages of the poetry (and narratives) of the Great War. That message begins by attacking ideology and language and continues by deploying irony against bitter truth. The aristocratic rhetoric of honour and glory, of "the old bean" and the "Sportsman," is a deadly siren to the young and innocent who are called to be sacrificed to the god Mars.⁸ Douglas's reflections on war do not constitute such an overt protest, yet remain more in the tradition of the trench poets (and narrators) than of "his warlike elders."⁹

Douglas makes clear that his present view of what needs to be written, and how, may not be permanent. "Now I will write of [war]," he says, "and perhaps one day cynic and lyric will meet and make me a balanced style. Certainly you will never see the long metrical similes and galleries of images again" (*PM* 127-28). Finally, Douglas closes the letter with what sounds like a justification for his voluntarily taking part in the brutalities of the war, as well as a rationalization for his lack of hope:

Perhaps all this may make it easier for you to understand why I am writing the way I am and why I shall never go back to the old forms. You may even begin to see some virtue in it. To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others. To trust anyone or to admit any hope of a better world is criminally foolish, as foolish as it is to stop working for it. It sounds silly to say work without hope, but it can be done; it's only a form of insurance; it doesn't mean work hopelessly (*PM* 128).

I have violated the chronology of Douglas's statements on poetry to save his essay "*Poets in This War*" until now. During the war, some critics had bemoaned the lack of war poetry compared with that of the First World War. In his essay, offered casually to

Tambimuttu at *Poetry London* in 1943 but unknown and unpublished until found with his papers years later, Douglas answers the question “Where are all the war poets?”¹⁰ He begins by pointing out that all the poets “who are now regarded as poets of the last war” were soldiers. By this he means front line soldiers, as described in the letter to John Hall. After giving his opinions in a short review of the Great War poets, Douglas gets to the business of insulting editors and fellow poets. Henry Treece is the “head of *some sort* of poetic school.” John Hall is at the “*headquarters* of the International Art Club.”¹¹ John Lehmann publishes the repressed musings of the residents of “British barrack rooms.” Tambimuttu, his own potential publisher, probably has an “exotic *uniform*,” and the youngest poets, “sprung up among the *horrors* of War Time Oxford,” are far too inexperienced to write any war poetry of worth (*PM* 118-19; emphasis added).

Only Douglas himself, as the only known (to himself) combat veteran then currently writing poetry, is immune from his harsh appraisal. Even the “clerks and staff officers” at the “back end” of the army in North Africa are denied their right to write about war. These attacks are leading to Douglas’s central question--“Why are there no poets like Owen and Sassoon who lived with the fighting troops and wrote of their experiences while they were enduring them?” This question gives him the opportunity not only to discuss poetry, but to comment on the unchanged nature of war:

The reasons are psychological, literary, military and strategic, diverse. There are such poets, but they do not write. They do not write because there is nothing new, from a soldier’s point of view, about this war except its mobile character.¹² There are two reasons: hell cannot be let loose twice: it was loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. The hardships, pain and boredom; the behavior of the living and the appearance of the dead, were so accurately described by the poets of the Great War that everyday on the battlefields of the western desert--and no doubt on the Russian battlefields as well--their poems are illustrated. Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write, would be tautological (*PM* 120).

Douglas does not mention his own style as a possible exception to this dearth of originality, but by defining the problem he gives himself an advantage in developing a style which at least says the same things in a different way.

Of separate interest in this last excerpt is Douglas's apparent naiveté about the power of preconceived images to shape lived experience. His tendency to catalogue the sights of the battlefield in the terminology of the Great War poets led him to believe in a close similarity of experience with the poets of the First World War. The subjectivity of Douglas could not escape the echoes of the trenches, nor was he conscious of the formative nature of his reading as it determined his understanding of the battlefield.¹³

He ends the essay with a prediction: "It seems to me that the whole body of English war poetry of this war, civil and military, will be created after war is over" (*PM* 120). Again, Douglas excludes his own writing, but his conversations at El Ballah hospital and in England before D-day say something else. Keith Douglas not only told people he would not survive the war; he seems to have believed his own prophecy, not waiting until "war [was] over" to complete his narrative and collect as many poems as possible.

Buried in this essay in the middle of a separate insult about the effeminate--in his estimation--poets of the backwaters is a fact that Douglas perceptively reveals but perhaps fails to comprehend completely:

But no paper shortage stems the production of hundreds of slim volumes and earnestly compiled anthologies of wartime poetry, *Poems From the Forces*, &c. Above all there are a hundred shy little magazines, whose contributors are their most ardent supporters. Benevolent publishers, it seems, are constantly patting blushing young poets on the head (I am tempted to use blushing as Masefield does) and encouraging them to lisp in numbers (*PM* 119).

One of the surprises about wartime publishing was the volume of amateur poetry given space in small, sometimes popular periodicals despite official paper shortages. I suggest that the glut of published poetry Douglas mentions is one of the reasons his own poetry went largely unnoticed in the flood of new, mostly amateur verse and was ignored in the immediate aftermath of the war. Douglas might still be unknown except for the efforts of his personal acquaintances, who valued his work and combined this admiration with their access to the literary community to have his poetry published.

The abundance of poetry, a large percentage of it mediocre at best, damaged the general reputation of poetry during the war and provided evidence to those wishing to

denigrate the entire decade.¹⁴ Linda Shires, in her Preface to *British Poetry of the Second World War*, examines the poetry of the 1940s with the intention of explaining why it has such a bad reputation. She points quickly to one reason that seems highly creditable: "we view the 1940s through the distorted lens of the 1950s poets and critics, many of whom were connected directly with the Movement." Shires continues:

The Movement and others not associated with it directly distorted the previous decade when they chose the Apocalyptic (a group headed by Henry Treece and J.F. Hendry) and Dylan Thomas to typify the poetry of the period. The romantic Apocalyptic with their canon and firework display of images and the inferior quality of even their best work stood out as a prime target. Yet no single group, and least of all this one, could be called representative of the 1940s. Furthermore, when they dismissed all the poets of the 1940s along with Thomas as 'romantic scribblers,' they ignored the best poets of the war years who deserve re-evaluation. Poets such as Henry Reed, Roy Fuller, G.S. Fraser, Keith Douglas, and Alun Lewis hardly fit the label of wild irrationalists.

There has been a general reluctance to examine this decade seriously. Rather, the clichés about the 1940s have been maintained by critics decades later. (Shires xiii-xiv)

The generally accepted bias against the poetry of this period worked synergistically with misfortunes more specific to Douglas in temporarily muting the stark clarity and sincerity of his poetic voice. His "Poets in This War" leaves an impression of Keith Douglas as not quite an outsider to the literary world, but perhaps an eccentric with a few uncomplimentary opinions about the art of his peers. His no-nonsense philosophy, his contradictory personality, and his candid approach help explain the devotion of his friends and the indifference, or malevolence, of the rest of his acquaintances.

Douglas's prose narrative, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, was first published in 1946 and has always garnered more praise than his poetry, which first appeared in collected form in 1951. These dates could be telling. The wartime mentality had disappeared and the seven years between Douglas's death and the publication of *The Collected Poems* by Editions Poetry London were years of significant change in poetic sensibilities. Douglas's poetry was already unacceptably passé when it first arrived in print, a fact which is further enforced by Shires conclusion that the poetry of the 1940s suffered by being judged through the "lens of 1950s poets and critics." In a 1973 review, Ian

Hamilton pointed out that Douglas's reputation "suffered from the journalese dismissal" of his period. Hamilton then kindly excuses Blunden and Tambimuttu by attributing the delay to "manuscript problems."¹⁵

Many of the earliest reviews held that his poems (16 selected poems were included in a supplement to the first edition of *Alamein to Zem Zem*) were merely rough drafts and his range limited. Comments about limited range are understandable given that only poems relating to war themes were included with *Alamein to Zem Zem*. Some complimentary reviews also surfaced, but these, too, usually considered Douglas work only within the sub-genre of war poetry. Alan Ross counted Douglas among the best four poets of the war, and wrote an enthusiastic review in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1954, calling Douglas "the most sympathetic poet of [my] generation."¹⁶

In addition to co-editing *Collected Poems* in 1951, G.S. Fraser championed Douglas in his Chatterton Lecture of 1956.¹⁷ Fraser noted, as Shires does in greater depth, that *Collected Poems* "appeared in an unfortunate year":

The year 1951 marked something of a watershed between two movements in contemporary English poetry. The prevailing mood among the younger poets of the 1940s, or at least among a fairly coherent group of them, was what was often called the mood of neo-romanticism. It was a mood, also, to which Keith Douglas had almost nothing to offer (Fraser 217).

Fraser goes on to paint a one-dimensional picture of Douglas as a militant cavalier who "in a sense . . . enjoyed his war" (Fraser 218). Scammell turns Fraser's misgivings over one of Douglas's mature poems, "Cairo Jag," into a condemnation of the lack of finish and incoherence of all of Douglas's poems. (WS 198; Fraser 227-228). Fraser's treatment, though limited by its view of Douglas's personality, does contain praise for the majority of Douglas's work. Fraser's lecture, then, taken whole, offers a balanced assessment of Douglas's work.¹⁸

"Unqualified praise" aptly characterizes Ted Hughes's article in *Critical Quarterly*, "The Poetry of Keith Douglas," and the Introduction to his 1964 edition of *Selected Poems*. Nearly every critic since the publication of these commentaries has mentioned

Hughes's acclamation of Douglas. Hughes begins the article by moving Douglas beyond the limitation of the "War Poet" label, asserting that "every poem he wrote, whether about war or not, has some special value" (*CQ* 43). Hughes goes back to the juvenilia of 1936 (Douglas then just 16) to begin his explication of specific poems. By breaking Douglas's progression into three phases, Hughes orders his examination of Douglas's poetic development.

Hughes claims that Douglas's poetry is "extremely forceful," has "razor energy," that the poet is a "renovator of language," and "infuses every word with a burning exploratory freshness of mind." Hughes concludes:

He has invented a style that seems able to deal poetically with whatever it comes up against. It is a language for the whole mind, at its most wakeful, and in all situations: a utility general style, as, for instance, Shakespeare's was, that combines a colloquial prose readiness with poetic breadth, a ritual intensity and music of an outstandingly high order with clear direct feeling, and yet in the end is nothing but casual speech. This is an achievement for which we can be grateful (*CQ* 48).

Hughes edited his article only slightly for the introduction to *Selected Poems*. He does add in the introduction that "war brought [Douglas's] gift to maturity. In a sense, war was his ideal subject; the burning away of all human pretensions in the ray cast by death" (Intro 13). Hughes's efforts sparked a re-examination of Douglas's work that has sustained itself, if not grown, over the past thirty years.

In the same year, Geoffrey Hill wrote an admiring review of Douglas's poetry in which he refers to Douglas as "one of the finest British poets of the last forty years," but adds that Douglas retains an "ambivalent status--at once 'established' and overlooked" (Hill 6). Hill builds his review around the epistemological significance of "I in another place," a line from Douglas's "Dead men," while also making a case, through comparison of Douglas with Wilfred Owen, for the special transcendence of "war poetry." In forwarding this opinion, Hill is attacking Hughes's inference that one should not emphasize Douglas's war poetry in an analysis of his overall body of work. While Hill agrees that the label of "war poet" allows critics to ignore much of Douglas's poetry, he

thinks Hughes has distracted the reader from the best of Douglas's work, which merely happens to concern war:

Hughes puts himself in a position where he seems to under-value the special intensity of the war-poetry.

One would assert, and Mr. Hughes would doubtless agree, that the crux of Douglas's achievement is to be found in those poems whose subject is war and the environment of war (Hill 7-8).

Hill works logically to a contention that the virtue of Douglas's art "arose from the necessity of his life as a soldier." More than making a claim for Douglas's work, though, Hill's cites Hughes for editorial inadequacies, for tidying up too neatly the manuscript problems of previous editions and for failing to include significantly variant versions of some of the major poems.¹⁹

Ian Hamilton offered a different opinion of Douglas's work in a series of articles published in *London Magazine* on the poetry of the 1940s. Hamilton gives examples of juvenilia to condemn Douglas's lack of a "firm, discovered personality," and refers to the detached irony of his poetry as "reticence stiffening into the tightlipped insensitivity of the officers' mess" (Hamilton 62). Hamilton finds stoicism and callousness where others find subdued emotion and satiric reserve, limitations and irritations where others find metaphysical realism and satisfying internal rhymes. Hamilton's influence expanded when his essays and reviews were collected and published as *A Poetry Chronicle* in 1973.

Anyone attempting to compose a balanced and objective study of Douglas necessarily finds it difficult to reconcile the highly divergent views of Hughes and Hamilton. Much of the later commentary not only echoes the terminology of Hamilton or Hughes, but reaches their extremes of opinion.

In 1966 John Waller, G.S. Fraser, and J.C. Hall edited *Collected Poems*, published in the United States by Chilmark Press and introduced by Edmund Blunden. This edition included the illustrations Douglas had produced for the book of verse he thought would be published by Tambimuttu in the mid-1940s. Faber published a new edition of *Alamein to Zem Zem* the same year. These two new editions sparked a second round of critical

commentary. One reviewer, Graham Martin, was particularly insightful without being biased:

Keith Douglas aspired towards Rosenberg's negative capability, but both usually see death as reality, always present, making other experience temporary, shallow, and without actually being pleased about this, they convey little sense of outrage or protest (*The Listener*, 1 Dec 1966 in WS 206).

A. Alvarez, another reviewer, was impressed with the honesty and candor of *Alamein to Zem Zem*, comparing it favorably with Robert Graves's Great War narrative, *Goodbye to All That*, and gave the poetry the kind of praise Douglas's letter to J.C. Hall leads us to believe he would have been pleased to hear:

But it is Douglas's poems which most completely express both the stupid, wasteful outrage of killing, and the tensions of guilt. They work by a kind of physical concentration of language, stripping away every inessential flourish of image or emotion, until they emerge as sharp, clean and 'simplified' as a knife, and as utterly lacking in self-pity (*Observer*, 13 Nov 1966 in WS 205).

In other words, in Alvarez's opinion, there is no bullshit in Douglas's poetry, including "useless pity."²⁰ Whether he was able to "write true things," perhaps only Douglas himself could know. An anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement*--perhaps Hamilton or an underling--had one answer to the question of whether Douglas had written poems that could be read as significant speech:

Death, especially in wartime and in action, is a great exaggerator . . . As a poet, Douglas had that dangerous youthful facility which prompts writers to put pen to paper without really having anything to say.

(Anonymous, *TLS*, 11 Dec 1966, in WS 206)

Even this negative review, though, specifies that Douglas was being considered "as a poet," leaving room for admiration of his prose.

Evident from the early criticism was the need for a more thorough understanding of Douglas, the man, in all his complexities and inconsistencies. Desmond Graham's authoritative 1974 biography seems to have done more for the reputation of Keith Douglas than any other text, and will perhaps guarantee continued interest and appreciation. Vernon Scannell extracts the essential message of Graham's biography in

his *New Statesman* review of the same year by emphasizing Douglas's paradoxical personality traits and the rebellious originality and intensity of his poetry:

Keith Douglas was a strange and complex personality whose character was composed of many contradictory elements: He was a keen horseman, rugger player and swimmer, yet a gifted artist with pencil and brush as well as with words; highly intelligent and sensitive, yet frequently arrogant and even ruthless in his personal relationships; a romantic who was continually falling in love and idealising the object of his affections, yet able to anatomise his emotional responses objectively, possessed of vanity and humility, a bit of a tough yet a poet of genius (Scannell 846).

The Graham biography includes samples of Douglas's paintings and drawings, and brief citations from correspondence, but a scholarly edition of the poetry remained to be published. Graham published such an edition in 1978 with *Complete Poems*, which gives documentary evidence for dating the poetry and offers alternate versions of those poems which show significant changes in the many drafts Douglas sometimes required. The reader should also realize that despite the title, *Complete Poems* does not contain all of Douglas's juvenilia.

Graham continued to champion Douglas's legacy and assist potential scholars in the 1980s with *Keith Douglas, A Prose Miscellany* (1985) and "Keith Douglas's Books," an article and listing of Douglas's surviving library in *The Book Collector* (1981). *A Prose Miscellany* provides the most direct access to Douglas's multiple faces, including prose, criticism, letters (including a substantial portion of the Douglas/Blunden correspondence), and fragments and early drafts of some of the poems.

More recent criticism reflects two conditions: first, the lasting influence of Hughes and Hamilton; second, the influence of Graham's biography and prose miscellany on subsequent judgments of Douglas's art. Over the past fifteen years Keith Douglas's contribution to the poetry of the twentieth century has been taken seriously and fewer curt dismissals of his talent have appeared in print. Doubters of his talent have now investigated Douglas's life and have subsequently found irony and subtlety in lines they once thought the work of a cold and unambiguous militant. Roger Garfitt had already explained one possible misconception in 1975 when he wrote, "Critics mistake his

masterly verse control for a cerebral detachment.” Garfitt goes on to confirm the value of Graham’s biography: “Douglas’s emotional history confirms what I have always felt to be the animus of his poetry, that the detachment is not cerebral but is rather a strategy deployed against the strength of feeling, a means of controlling it and making it positive . . .” (*Poetry Nation*, 4, 1975 in WS 212-13).

Michael Schmidt made the strongest claim for Douglas’s influence in the introduction to his *Eleven British Poets* in 1975. Schmidt contends that Douglas “left a mark” on Charles Tomlinson, Geoffrey Hill, and not surprisingly, Ted Hughes. Though his claim might be difficult to prove, some evidence supports Schmidt’s assertion. Comments on Douglas from both Hughes and Hill are cited in the discussion above and Tomlinson was one of the first (1961), and most persistent (again in 1975), to write admiringly of his poetry. William Scammell also points to the same three poet-critics as doing the most for Douglas’s improving reputation:

Not until Charles Tomlinson’s essay on ‘Poetry Today’ in 1961, Ted Hughes’s brilliant Introduction to his *Selected Poems* of Douglas in 1964, and Geoffrey Hill’s *Stand* review of the same year, did Douglas begin to get something like his due (WS 194).

Jon Silkin made his opinion on Douglas known in 1981, in direct response to a face-to-face charge by Hamilton that Silkin was wrong to think Douglas the best poet of the Second World War. Hamilton apparently added, “. . . go away and re-read Alun Lewis” (Silkin, *Agenda*, 49). Silkin returned to write even more convincingly on Douglas’s behalf. He focuses on an admiration he has for what he calls Douglas’s wit, and defines wit both “in the current sense of verbal sharpness” and in the “eighteenth-century sense of imagination, metaphysical imagination” (49). Silkin, among others, sees Douglas in the metaphysical tradition of Eliot and the soldier-poet tradition of Rosenberg, full of wit and courage. Finally, Silkin shows courage of his own by exalting Douglas for a trait not often thought pivotal to the poetic imagination:

It took not merely physical courage to fight, but imaginative courage to take the route Douglas describes [in the letter to J.C. Hall] above--a route new to the

matter of war and violence; the route of wit and its spoken poetry. Douglas took this route. No Bullshit. (Silkin, *Agenda*, 58)

In 1984, Edna Longley picked up the torch, contending that Douglas “has not come through on Hughes’s strong push” (Longley 94). Longley writes a dense and well-informed essay “‘Shit or Bust’ The Importance of Keith Douglas,” in which she glosses several critical views of Douglas, and attempts to situate him in the broader arena of the poetry of the twentieth century.²¹ Longley makes the only claim for Douglas that may go beyond Hughes’s praise:

Give or take a few immaturities, a few incompletions (“time is all I lacked”), Douglas achieved syntheses, both thematic and stylistic, since unmatched in English poetry. And within his fine balances speech and music, cynicism and lyricism *do* meet. As an aesthetic his economical prescription of economy -- ‘every word must work for its keep’ [from the letter to J.C. Hall]-- is not nearly as well known as it should be, in comparison with many inflated twentieth-century poetic manifestoes (Longley 11).

Desmond Graham published *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, subtitled *As a child he was a militarist . . .*, in 1985. Though no direct reaction followed this publication, it performed a crucial service by supplementing *Complete Poems* and the Graham biography of Douglas. These three texts together allow a nearly complete picture of Douglas and his limited body of work. One might only wish for more correspondence, and apparently some is yet inaccessible.²²

Four more critical pieces on Douglas require comment. Two of the most evocative and complimentary essays on the poet have appeared in the last eight years. Vincent Sherry’s concise look at a particular aspect of Douglas’s poetry, allowing it to be situated within the tradition of modern war poetry, was the first. In “Hectic Stasis: The War Poetry of Keith Douglas,” Sherry praises Douglas’s “pictorial as well as stylistic discipline” and hails his “combination of realistic violence and emotional composure” as the special achievement of his verse. Notice Sherry does not say ‘detachment’ but rather ‘composure’ when describing Douglas’s emotional response. The aspect of the poetry that seems most striking to Sherry he calls “hectic stasis,” and he illustrates this concept convincingly by pointing to the suspended animation of many of Douglas’s war-dead.

Sherry also situates Douglas in the tradition of the war poets:

Owen and Sassoon sing their declamations from one side of the issues, Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell from the other. Douglas's aversion to pity and his firmly anti-oratorical strategy mark his difference from that tradition.

Douglas's distaste for rhetoric is also informed by a literary sensibility. He is alert to the contradiction implicit in Owen's art: that Owen seeks to deter the coercions of nationalistic rhetoric through the coercions of his own oratory, more insidious in being in a musical declamation.

Douglas affirms his [emotional] control in the face of violence--emotional as well as physical violence--and *affords the reader the opportunity of an equally dispassionate response* (Sherry 298-301, emphasis added).

Sherry concludes that the refusal to perform a conventional, or what we have come to understand as an 'appropriate,' response to violent death and inhumanity, is exactly what allows Douglas's poetry to depict these all too common horrors with renewed significance, and places the poet, for a time, at the front of the class.

In the second significant essay, "Keith Douglas; War Poetry as Significant Speech," Mark Goldman makes his claim for Douglas up front: "In spite of the great tradition of war poetry, Douglas was able to contribute something new, profound, and lasting" (218). In this statement Goldman immediately places Douglas in the tradition of war poets. He also pays some attention to Douglas's non-combat poems,²³ and situates Douglas in the tradition of Eliot, Yeats, and Auden. Goldman does not address the related difficulty of situating the tradition of war poetry in the larger arena of poetry in general. If one appreciates war poetry (here, specifically "combatant" poetry), it is a reasonable assumption that he or she will admire Douglas's work. Further, if one places the best of war poetry in the same echelon as the best of poetry overall, Douglas's work is promoted and legitimized in the larger arena. However, if Douglas's combat poems are ignored when comparing him with all poets, his overall body of work suffers, but the option of simply placing him alongside Rosenberg or Owen may not elevate his work in the eyes of those who do not accept the importance of war poetry in general.

In 1993, Bernard Bergonzi joined the recent consensus that sees Douglas as the best English poet of the Second World War, and conjectures that Douglas may have become

the outstanding poet of his generation (Bergonzi 74). He notes that Douglas avoided direct expression of emotion, but recognizes that the pity “emerges obliquely” from the poetry. Along with many of the critics we have already considered, Bergonzi argues that Douglas wrote in the tradition of Eliot and Auden.

Lastly, with a phonetic analysis that goes far beyond the scope (but not the oscilloscope) of most poetic studies, David I. Masson explores the sounds of three of Douglas’s poems. In a tiny pamphlet published by The Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, Ltd., Masson breaks down the sound patterning of “The Prisoner,” written before Douglas left Sandhurst, “How to Kill,” his famous battle poem, and “On a Return from Egypt” (1944). What emerges is a highly technical affirmation of Douglas’s gift as a poet, not a claim that he was necessarily conscious of his complex phoneme patterns, but that he had an exceptional ear for the sounds and rhythms of words in combination, and was able to sustain a given pattern throughout a composition. Masson clearly states his conclusion, that Douglas succeeded, in the end, with the reconciliation of “lyric and cynic,” and mourns the early loss of his “superb mastery of words, his orchestration of utterance in the service of his myth-making transmutations of experience” (Masson 21).

Despite Edna Longley’s claim that Douglas “did not come through” on Hughes’s recommendations, anyone interested in Douglas’s poetry must conclude that Hughes and Desmond Graham saved the poet from anonymity. Ian Hamilton’s comments have carried less weight in the last decade, and those writing on Douglas in recent years have found much more to say about his strengths than his weaknesses. Critics who view Douglas as the leading poet of the Second World War are in prestigious company. It is also noticeable from the history of his critical reception that many of Douglas’s admirers are poet-critics, making him a so-called poet’s poet. Finally, most scholars agree that Douglas learned his lessons from Eliot, but retained the accessible speech of his Great War predecessors and avoided the softer subjectivity of his surviving peers.

Notes

1 Of immeasurable value in the effort to make Douglas's work accessible to a wider audience were Desmond Graham's three major contributions: the authoritative biography, *Keith Douglas 1920-1944* (1974); the first scholarly edition of the main body of his poetic works, *The Complete Poems of Keith Douglas* (1978); and the collection of his short prose and correspondence, *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany* (1985).

2 Douglas was nonetheless thankful to Hall for his continual attempts to get Douglas published. Hall was finally successful when Bale and Staples published *Selected Poems*, featuring Douglas, Hall, and Norman Nicholson, in 1943. Douglas had appeared in 1941 in *Eight Oxford Poets* and Blunden wrote to Mrs. Douglas in January 1943 that he had been able to get Douglas's poem "Devils" published in the *Times Literary Supplement*--the first of many, later with the help of Tambimuttu (*KD* 131, 147n).

3 Sheila Shannon's *Spectator* review (30 April 1943) may be that to which Douglas is referring here. (*KD* 215, 280)

4 The letter, dated 10 August 1943, survives as a fragment, and is reproduced as such in Graham's *Prose Miscellany*. This paragraph is the first paragraph of the existing fragment (*PM* 127-128).

5 Mark I. Goldman, "Keith Douglas; War Poetry as 'Significant Speech,'" *Durham University Journal* 51(1990): 217-226.

6 Douglas's preference for the poetry of the battle-experienced soldier is evident from several sources, but perhaps most convincingly in the essay I address below, *Poets in this war*, 1943. Douglas's chosen role models from the Great War--Rosenberg, Owen, Sassoon, and Blunden--were all "hardened" (or destroyed by) front line experience and wrote of an environment of omnipresent death.

7 The titles for two articles on Douglas's poetry have come from this short statement: David L Jones "To Write True Things: The Metaphysical Realism of Keith Douglas" *Odyssey: A Journal of the Humanities* 11.1-2 (1989): 29-35, and Mark Goldman's "Keith Douglas: War poetry as 'Significant Speech,'" *Durham University Journal* 51.2 (1990): 217-226.

8 My language here recalls the introduction and selected passages from Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* as well as the theme of Douglas's poem "Sportsmen," alternately titled "Aristocrats."

9 One of Douglas's earliest surviving prose compositions was an autobiography of his pre-adolescence which began: "As a child he was a militarist, and like many of his warlike elders, built up heroic opinions upon little information, some scrappy war stories of his father" (*PM* 13). There is more evidence in his war poetry that he was following the thought of his Tutor, Blunden, and others (Graves, Sassoon, et. al.) rather than his father, who never saw the intense horrors of the trenches of France.

10 At the end of a letter to Tambimuttu dated 11 July 1943, Douglas wrote, "If you want any articles on poetry I could send you one or two--for instance one on the lack of

Owens, Sassoons etc. in this war" (*PM* 125). The essay was first published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 April 1971, p. 478. Quoted here from *PM* 117-118.

11 By the time of writing, Douglas had seen combat and was insulting Hall by emphasizing his relative safety--and ignorance of battle--in London. He added later, "The poets behind the line are not war poets, in the sense of soldier poets, because they do not have the soldier's experience at first hand" (*PM* 120).

12 Douglas, a first-hand participant in mechanized warfare and a student of literature, here directly contradicts the assertion of Paul Fussell that the 1939-1945 war did not differ greatly from the first war in that it also consisted mainly of static battles interspersed with brief periods of movement. Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1989).

13 William Scammell makes a similar observation concerning the influence of the First World War poets on Douglas: "There are no elements in the scene that have not been drawn with consummate skill by his predecessors. Hence one part of his struggle is with the linguistic and poetic paradigms that work to determine his response in advance" (WS 43).

14 A.T. Tolley (*The Poetry of the Forties*, Manchester UP, 1985), Linda M. Shires (*British Poetry of the Second World War*, St. Martin's, 1985), and Edna Longley (*Poetry in the Wars*, U of Delaware P, 1987) are examples of attempts to answer this indictment. All three pay particular attention to the resurrection of the poetry of the 1940s.

15 Ian Hamilton, "The Forties." In *A Poetry Chronicle*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 56-57. Tambimuttu was famous for promising publication of more manuscripts than he could deliver, but Blunden may be innocent, as Hamilton allows, because fragments of different versions of many of the poems were spread along the path Douglas traveled during the last years of his life. He often sent different versions in letters, or edited earlier poems which would then be sent to other than the holder of the original copy. Blunden, Tambimuttu, Mrs. Douglas, John Hall, *Personal Landscape*, and others, all had portions of Douglas's work. William Scammell, in his review of criticism in *Keith Douglas: A Study*, (Faber and Faber, 1988), blames Tambimuttu alone for delayed publication and adds: "perhaps [Tambimuttu's] championship was itself an element in Douglas's tardy recognition, since the literary world viewed his endorsements with understandable suspicion" (WS 195). For a colorful (exaggerated/fictional?) account of Tambimuttu's life and style, see John Maclare-Ross, "Tambimuttu and the Progress of Poetry London" in *Memoirs of the Forties*, (London: Alan Ross Ltd., 1965) 135-152.

16 Ross also included Sidney Keyes, Alun Lewis, and Roy Fuller. (Alan Ross, British Council booklet *Poetry 1945-1950*, Longmans 1951. Cited in WS 196.)

17 Scammell seems to have gotten the date of this lecture wrong in his review of criticism in *Keith Douglas: A Study*. Scammell says the lecture took place in 1951, but Fraser, in his own collection of essays, including the full transcript of his lecture on Douglas, gives the more specific date, 14 March, 1956. Scammell apparently confused the date of publication for *Collected Poems* with the date of the lecture.

18 The lecture misses on one or two relatively important biographical details. For example, Fraser fails to mention that 'I listen to the desert wind' (originally titled 'Milena') was a poem written in direct and immediate response to his discovery that he had been superseded as the fiancé of Milena Pegna by Norman Ilett, a close friend of his from Christ's Hospital. Douglas seemed to take the event in stride, remaining friends with both Milena and Norman, but shows his bitterness in the poem, and asked David Hicks to publish it immediately (*KD* 160).

19 Hill also articulates the need for a publication which would include Douglas's prose narrative of the fighting and some of his graphic art. Hailing *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, which included poetry, prose, letters, and drawings, as a model, Hill calls for a similar treatment of Douglas's talents. All of Hill's wishes are answered later by the combination of Desmond Graham's three contributions, *Complete Poems, A Biography 1920-1944*, and *A Prose Miscellany*.

20 In his desert diary, Douglas records his reaction to the expressions of agony on the faces of the dead by writing, "This picture, as they say, told a story. It filled me with useless pity" (*A to ZZ*, in *WS* 42).

21 Longley does slip on a minor fact when pointing to Yingcheng, instead of Milena, as the inspiration for "I listen to the desert wind" (Longley 102). A variant was titled "Milena" (*CP* 136) and Graham discusses the background to this poem in the biography (*KD* 160).

When Douglas deserted from divisional headquarters to join the battle, his batman (as quoted by Douglas in *Alamein to Zem Zem*) thought him bold and exclaimed, "I like you sir, you're shit or bust you are" (*NBMW* 383).

22 The British Library, London, and the Brotherton Library, Leeds, both have significant numbers of unpublished letters to and from Keith Douglas as well as military memorabilia, photographs, telegraphs, and airgraphs.

23 Non-Combat poems as opposed to non-war poems; most of Douglas's later poems were in some way influenced by the wartime mentality.

Chapter 3

The Poetry of Keith Douglas

Bête Noire is the name of the poem I can't write; a protracted failure, which is also a protracted success I suppose. Because it is a poem I begin to write in a lot of other poems: this is what justifies my use of that title for the book. The beast, which I have drawn as a black mare sitting behind the horseman, is indefinable: sitting down to try and describe it, I have sensations of physical combat, and after five hours of writing last night, which resulted in failure, all my muscles were tired. But if he is not caught, at least I can see his tracks (anyone may see them), in some of the other poems. My failure is that I know so little about him, beyond his existence and the infinite patience and extent of his malignity.

--Keith Douglas, note on drawing for the jacket of *Bête Noire* [March 1944] (CP, 120)

If at times my eyes are lenses
through which the brain explores
constellations of feeling
my ears yielding like swinging doors
admit princes to the corridors
into the mind, do not envy me.
I have a beast on my back

--fragment of "Bête Noire"
[February-March 1944]
(CP 119)

In addition to simply introducing Douglas's poetry and illustrating its complexity and nuance, this chapter makes two assertions. First, that Douglas struggled with the moral and ethical implications of his participation in war--that he was more than a highly literate militant. Descriptions of violence in Douglas's poetry often form allegories for psychological conflict. Central to this first claim is a disagreement among critics over the tone of Douglas's poetic voice. As mentioned in chapter 2, where some hear detached reticence and insensitivity, others hear subdued emotion and satiric reserve. Douglas's compulsion to look for the purely aesthetic, even in scenes with undeniable emotional significance, might be interpreted as heartless callousness, but may also indicate rational control of perception and description or may betray an even deeper anxiety over his own reactions.

Second, I will contend that he employed irony and ambiguity in his poetry to question certain nationalistic rationalizations for violent action and to critique traditional descriptions of warfare. I do not intend to argue that Douglas questioned the necessity of fighting against the Nazi regime, only that he had become cynical about the traditional

rhetoric of patriotic justifications and the tendency of such rhetoric to misrepresent the true nature of warfare, often concealing the horrors of combat, for instance, through use of sports analogies or non-violent metaphors.

The best argument for the poet should come from the poetry itself. For this purpose I will concentrate mainly on his most mature work. Douglas had begun working toward his mature style during his last year at Oxford (1939-40), and continued to progress during army training while still in England. Two or three poems from early 1941 might be considered mature, and certainly by 1942 he had established his talent. The poetry for which he is best remembered was mostly written during and after his time at El Ballah, General Hospital, beginning in January, 1943. From that time until his death, the quality of his work remained consistent. This chapter shows the last stages of his development, culminating in an analysis of what I consider his best poetry. However, I begin with a single piece of juvenilia.

Ted Hughes's 1963 article "The Poetry of Keith Douglas," begins by questioning the "war-poet" stereotype from which Hughes thinks Douglas has suffered. The poem Hughes cites is "Encounter with a God," written at the age of sixteen.¹ Hughes finds the language forceful and the technique 'flawless'; he places the poem in the category of 'virtuoso juvenilia,' and sees unlimited potential in the economy of its phrasing and the energy of its undertones.

The first stanza introduces the main character:

Ono-no-komache the poetess
sat on the ground among her flowers,
sat in her delicate-patterned dress
thinking of the rowers,
thinking of the god Daikoku.

This gives a clue to an aim of the poem: it makes a statement about the role of poet, and poetry, within a tradition. Douglas admired T.S. Eliot and had already included an allusion to *The Waste Land* in “Strange Gardener” (1935).² In “Encounter with a God,” the poetess can be seen to closely follow the spirit of the 1917 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in which Eliot separates art and experience. “The difference between art and the event is always absolute” (Eliot 19). According to Eliot, the traditions and technical constraints of poetry enrich its texture and allow the innovations of the individual artist only within the limitation of sustaining contact with that which has come before. Artworks evolve by molding, after being molded by, their precedents. The entire history of poetry forms an organic whole that constantly adds to itself but cannot be said to progress or improve, only to remain alive through constant change and renewal.

Looking to “Encounter with a God,” we see that the poetess sits in a delicately “patterned dress,” and imagines the beauty of her drunken and obese father, the god Daikoku, “in accordance with the rule.” The mandates of poetic expectation and tradition supersede the tawdry reality of Daikoku:

Who said

I am not beautiful,
I do not wish to be wonderfully made,
I am intoxicated dutiful daughter,
and I will not be in a poem

Despite her father’s refusal to be in a poem, Ono-no-komache, realizing that it is only her idealized version of him that will appear in the poem, continues writing.

But the poetess sat still
holding her head and making verses:
‘How intricate and peculiarly well-

arranged the symmetrical belly purses
of lord Daikoku.

The *idea* of order overwhelms the actuality of disorder and the disappointments of reality. The poetess is “Thinking of the rowers,/thinking of the god Daikoku./Thinking of the rock pool,” because filtered experiences, reconstructed in the mind of the poet, affect more emotion, or at least different emotions, than lived experience. According to the rule, a god must be beautiful, and the image of him should be symmetrical, full of order. The poetess remains unfazed; her art retains only a hint of the actuality, but creates its own truth.

“Encounter with a God” has a lighter theme and a livelier rhythm than most of Douglas’s youthful verses. From the start Douglas dealt with an obsession with death and time. Many of the early poems have morbid sub-currents. Later this evolved into a prophecy of gloom, a resignation to the inevitability of death and the futility of joyful song. In 1940, when he had been at Oxford for a few months, he wrote “A Round Number,” which might be considered more metaphysical than its predecessors. Douglas’s mood is bitter melancholy, with a premonition of the coming decade, “For I can’t feed hope any more/and Time has reached a round number” (*CP* 41). Graham rightly points to the undeniable presence of Yingcheng in the poem, to Douglas’s continual obsession with the loss of first love, and to his subsequent loss of faith in love in general (*KD* 92).

Douglas often found disappointment in romance because he idealized the women he met and they could never live up to this impossible standard. He brought unrealistic expectations to everything he experienced: military decorum, love affairs, friendship, leadership, and war. The cynic Keith Douglas was not the “happy fatalist” of his *Cherwell* editorial (1 June 1940, *PM* 65-66), but the opposite--a chronically disappointed idealist. Douglas’s partial admiration of the army colonels he memorializes in

“Sportsmen,” springs from the same dynamic. He thinks them antiquated in their gallantry, but appreciates their ability to live up to the high standards--right or wrong--that their aristocratic code requires. Being conscious of his own idealism did little to prevent the frustration of a young man continually bewildered by a less than ideal world. “A Round Number” shows an understanding of disappointed hope: “and with rank ivy will pull down/my hope of happiness and renown,” and the price of idealism: “and I think for recompense/she only lived inside my head.” The ideal only occurs in the neat recesses of the rational, and naive, mind.

At the risk of reinforcing the stereotype of Douglas as strictly a war poet, I begin a serious look at his more mature poetry with those poems written after his army induction. Ted Hughes feels that Douglas had merely found his ideal subject in war and that this should not be seen as a limitation. Guessing at Douglas’s probable poetic advancement had he *not* gone into the army and off to war proves little. Whether by cause and effect or coincidence, Douglas’s poetry matured in proportion with his proximity to battle, reaching an apex only after Alamein. The convergence of many factors, including his age, the loss of innocence, his departure from school, his exposure to different cultures, his firsthand knowledge of violence and death, and his repeated romantic disappointments, prevents critics from determining the exact reason for his rapid maturation. Resisting the temptation to speculate on his future, had he survived the European campaign, has been difficult for many critics, but we cannot mourn what might have been at the expense of ignoring what Douglas did accomplish.

The first poem in Graham’s chronology of Douglas’s army life, “An Exercise Against Impatience,” reminds us of Alun Lewis’s more famous and more successful “All Day It Has Rained.” Douglas’s poem describes the ominous sky of 1940, and reflects the boredom of the “backwater” poets Douglas later condemned. Even full grammatical sentences fail to convey a coherent focus. After a less than apocalyptic buildup-- “these

signs are not of the world's end"--the final stanza sounds slightly like the slogans of 1914:

Even, we will command and wield
good forces. And if we die? And if we die
those we have met or heard of will not be cold
they are as suitable as you and I.

Douglas was yet to shed the traditional romantic notions of the officer's Equitation School, and may have been upbeat merely because of the novelty and promise of a new routine. He would soon return to a more familiar tone.

"The Prisoner," written at Sandhurst (1940), recalls the Douglas we recognize from earlier works, and simultaneously marks a step in his development to full maturity. Yingcheng again provides the main motivation for this exploration of opposites and obscure meanings.

Today, Cheng, I touched your face
with two fingers, as a gesture of love,
for I can never prove enough
by sight or sense your strange grace;

but like moths my hands return
to your skin, that's luminous
like a lamp in a paper house,
and touch, to teach love and learn.

Here we begin to recognize an emerging concentration on contrasts: bone versus flesh, hard permanence versus intangible fragility, transient love versus omnipresent death.

I think a thousand hours are gone
that so, like gods, we'd occupy:
but alas, Cheng, I cannot tell why,
today I touched a mask stretched on the stone-

hard face of death.

The desirability of death comes from its sympathetic permanence and its ability to reconcile the conflicting impulses of the psyche. Love, unlike death, constantly abandons the lover. Hard cruel bone “survives” the bright flesh. The poet is drawn to death by its loyalty. Human love is fickle. The honesty of hard bone wishes to escape the insincerity of flesh. The final, incomplete “quatrain” contains the essence, and also the ambiguity, of the poem:

There was the urge
to escape the bright flesh and emerge
of the ambitious cruel bone.

The prisoner of “The Prisoner,” we find out later from Douglas’s letter to J.C. Hall (26 Jun 1943, in *PM*, 123), is the skeleton, whose subjectivity seems attached to the poet. The prisoner skeleton wishes to escape the flesh, and emerge *of* the bone. Does the *poet* have “the urge to escape?” If so, there seems to be some confusion; the poet (the “I” of this poem) is both touching the mask of flesh from outside and feeling the urge to escape from within. Is this confusion of subjectivity intentional? Does touching the mask of the other’s mortality make the poet wish to escape his own? Emerging *of* the “ambitious cruel bone” is also tied to the idea of death. Death helps the skeleton emerge from the flesh. The continual press of time on mortal bodies makes death appear ambitious, undeniable, cruel to the mantle of life. Somehow, though, the cruelty of the lover exceeds the cruelty of death. Whereas the lover is fickle, transitory, insincere, death is

certain, permanent, and straightforward. The tercet of the fourth stanza cuts life and lyric short and gives death the last word; the prisoner skeleton escapes the illusion of flesh and the poet eludes the confinement of form by stopping short--refusing to complete the quatrain.

At Wickwar, in 1941, Douglas wrote another poem with many of the same images and some new ones that looked forward to Douglas's battle pieces. "The House" again works through an obsession for a woman and the subject's inability to extract the vision of her from his mind. The house of the poem forms a metaphor for the subject, who inspects, "all those that pass" through the transparent walls, while his eye, a pillar, scrutinizes the visitors. The subject is ultimately introspective and the metaphors are complex metaphysical renderings of the processes of thought and emotion. Twice the visitors--people in the poet's life--are characterized as shadows; at one point they are "weightless" shadows, like the "weightless mosquito" that casts a shadow in the later poem "How to Kill." The metaphysical metaphor of thought becomes more real than the physical reality of the subject's life.

"The House" was one of the four additional poems Douglas sent to T.S. Eliot after the first encouraging letter. Douglas fails to establish a coherent metaphor in the first stanza:

I am a pillar of this house
of which it seems the whole is glass
likewise transparent to the touch
for men like weightless shadows march
ignorantly in at the bright portico
or through a wall serenely go
unnoticing: myself am like a mouse
and carefully inspect all those that pass

In his marginal comments, Eliot mentioned the inconsistency of the main metaphor. “Do you mean you also are glass?” He seems puzzled by Douglas’s abrupt changes of metaphorical perspective, writing, “I don’t think you should be a pillar and a mouse in the same stanza”³

In the fourth stanza, the subject becomes lonely after realizing that the house is empty:

But when for weeks, months no one came near
an unpleasant prompting of suspicious fear
sent me climbing up to inspect the high
attic, where I made a curious discovery.

The subject finds the body of a “young lady/whom I admit I knew once.” Death, he reflects, has made her more beautiful, and by residing only in the attic--the upper reaches of the poet’s mind--she has attained a permanence. The idealized *thought* of Yingcheng, or any former love, is more beautiful and more lasting than the woman herself. Death--the loss of her material presence--changes her, “until she’s the most permanent thing/in this impermanent building.” Perhaps Eliot misunderstands the intentional paradox of idea being more substantial than physical experience when, in the accompanying letter, he says:

I am least certain about the one called *The House*. It is obscure and I am not sure that its myth is wholly consistent. For instance, toward the end you spoke of exorcising the dead lady in the upper room. One does speak of exorcising ghosts from material houses but in this case, the lady to be exorcised seems to be very much more substantial than the house in which you have set her (Coleman, 731).

Eliot is correct about the myth being inconsistent, but the “strange fact” of the ideal lady being more permanent than the physical structure of the house or the body of the poet seems exactly Douglas’s point. The subject cannot get over this idea of love, cannot expel his feelings:

I never studied such things; it will need a wiser
practitioner than me to exorcise her
but till the heart is dust and the gold head
disintegrates, I shall never hear the tread
of the visitors at whom I cannot guess,
the beautiful strangers, coming to my house.

Until he can put aside the thoughts of this ideal woman, he cannot love the living as he loves intangible ideas and ideals.

“The House” was still a less-than-mature poem, but Douglas had begun to play with images which became important to later, more focused efforts. “Men like weightless shadows” becomes “A shadow is a man/when the mosquito death approaches” (“How to Kill”). The transparent walls of the “house that devils made” gets transfigured into a skull with “unsubstantial walls” that can barely contain “these idiots of the mind” in “Devils.” William Scammell pays perhaps too much attention to “The House,” but for the same reasons it is discussed here: its devices introduce many recurrent images and themes and prepare us for an understanding of subsequent poems. Its weaknesses allow us to appreciate the economical use of language and consistent clarity of images in Douglas’s mature work.

Two important pre-Egypt poems, “Time Eating” and “Simplify me when I’m Dead,” were written shortly before Douglas left for the Middle East in 1941. “Time Eating” depicts the insatiable appetite of time, devouring everything in a never-ending cycle of growth and death. The first four stanzas, each comprised of a single sentence, gain effectiveness by being read monotonously, like the relentless ticking of a clock. The final stanza adds a couplet and disrupts the established rhythm, thus creating an emphatic ending:

But Time, who ate my love, you cannot make
such another. You who can remake
the lizard's tail and the bright snakeskin
cannot, cannot. That you gobbled in
too quick: and though you brought me from a boy
you can make no more of me, only destroy.

"Time Eating" forms a declaration of maturity amidst a depiction of the brutality of time, ceaselessly pushing us onward to death. At the age of 20, Douglas felt his youth completed and his life suspended in anticipation of death--"you can make no more of me, only destroy." Again, many of the images of this poem will be used in later works; stones, the stomach, and snakeskin all appear again. An inescapable beast embodies time, chewing, masticating, devouring. Most of all, this poem, written during training at Wickwar in 1941, allows a first view of Douglas's mature sense of time's onslaught against life and youth. The feeling of time running short never leaves him. In his last poem he laments, "time is all I lacked." The fear of losing youth and love to the incessant beat of the clock brings to mind "To His Coy Mistress" but Douglas replaces Marvell's wingéd chariot with the ravenous black beast of time and substitutes all hope of happiness for the virgin mistress.

In looking at the mature work, I have chosen to concentrate on poems that directly relate to war for two reasons. First, this allows a more substantial treatment of one type of Douglas's mature poetry and avoids the problem of talking too broadly about the later body of work. All of his later poetry recommends itself to further investigation, but it would be nearly impossible to discuss all of Douglas's recurring images and themes in the space allowed. Second, as a subordinate consideration, I would like to address the question of Douglas's view of war, or, more precisely, militancy. Though the primary aim of this discussion will be to give a general explication of several of Douglas's later

poems, I would also like to carry the analysis of his enigmatic views on martial behavior through this essay. The history of criticism on Douglas's poetry makes obvious the difference of opinion regarding this pivotal question. Was Keith Douglas a cold, unapologetic warrior and would-be aristocrat, or a highly complex and often uncertain young man with paradoxical tendencies, caught up in a tide of immense events? The latter of these two descriptions sounds more charitable, but includes the former. The answer to this question has played a decisive role in the reading of Douglas's poems, and has thus determined the final judgment of several critics.

While the question of Douglas's militancy may at first appear trivial, having little to do with a final analysis of his poetry, for those who place Douglas's work within the limited genre of "war poetry," the question becomes pivotal to an understanding--and legitimization--of his irony and ambivalence. To judge him as a wholehearted and naive adherent to nationalistic ideals and military zeal would, without argument, change our perception of his poetry and prose by allowing a view of only one side of his multi-dimensional art, necessarily removing the shadows from a body of work that would be simultaneously flattened as the complexities of the author/poet are stripped away.

We can look to "Simplify me when I'm dead" for his ironic warning:

Of my skeleton perhaps
so stripped, a learned man will say
'He was of such a type and intelligence,' no more.

Thus when in a year collapse
particular memories, you may
deduce, from the long pain I bore

the opinions I held, who was my foe
and what I left, even my appearance
but incidents will be no guide.

It might be argued that Douglas's obsession with military activities sprang from a fascination with the stripped down essences that war makes paramount; his interest in the soldier poets of the Great War is well documented by Graham and others. One might then argue that Douglas wanted more than anything to be a poet. His preference for writing over soldiering was confirmed in early 1944 by his rush to compile his existing works for possible publication by Tambimuttu while showing less interest in army preparations for Normandy. He valued war experience--participation in battle and close encounters with mortality--because he saw in it the material of important poetry. G.S. Fraser remembers Douglas's post-Alamein sentiments: "About fighting he said it was an experience he'd been glad to have but that he'd seen everything necessary. Everything else would be repetition" (*KD* 225). Douglas did not enjoy battle for its own sake, but for the experience and the poetic material it offered.

Reading the fragments of his "Bête Noire" poem, it is possible to feel his frustration at not being able to understand death despite seeing its face. Even after his war experience, Douglas admitted, in his "On a Return from Egypt," that he had yet to "kiss, person of love or death . . ." (*CP* 122). The contention that Douglas valued his war experience might again be reinforced after considering the influence of his Oxford mentor, Edmund Blunden.⁴ Blunden spent his life grappling with the facts and affects of the First World War, and Douglas no doubt admired his ability to speak personally and almost casually about the formative experience of battle. Though some have suggested otherwise,⁵ Douglas no doubt understood the ironies and "grim realities" of war; the glory to which he aspired was not the glory merely of a soldier, but that of the creditable voice of a soldier-poet. He did not necessarily covet the military and war for their own

sake, other than for the aesthetic appeal of order, dress, and ceremony, but for their ability to give him the experience he thought his poetry so urgently needed.

Much has been made of hyperbolic comments such as the ones Douglas made the day he signed up for service, well before writing his most famous poems or participating in battle. While I am not ready to dismiss them, neither do I think they paint an accurate picture of the poet when taken in isolation from other textual and biographical clues.⁶

The first of his war poems, “Dead Men,” was published in March 1943 in David Hicks’s Cairo periodical, *Citadel*. This first post-Alamein poem exploits the contrast between the city and the deadly desert landscape, but not as effectively or to the extent that “Cairo Jag” does. While contrasting the carefree lovers of Cairo with the dead of the battlefield, it gives a macabre picture of a wild dog scavenging the desert dead as mindlessly as the lover, paying no heed to time or reason. Though interesting in its use of this dichotomy to draw a parallel to the two similar tendencies in the human imagination--toward mindless passion or animalistic indifference--the poem ends with a didactic tone that spoils the subtlety of the resultant tension. Instead of the recommendation of the last sentence, “The prudent mind resolves/on the lover’s or the dog’s attitude for ever,” perhaps the reader should be left to wonder whether the dog’s and the lover’s attitudes are, finally, the same. Neither dogs nor lovers grasp the significance of life or death, unlike the soldier who has seen both options and understands romance to be little more than futile idealism.

“Dead Men” makes use of the most familiar of Douglas’s rhyme schemes, *abccba*. This pattern seems carefully chosen and works well to balance Douglas’s style between lyric and cynic. The *a* and *b* rhymes are so far separated as to become less obvious, if noticed at all, but the regular pattern provides a form that ties Douglas to older traditions. The distance between some rhymed endings hides half rhymes and the meter lends further control to the voice by refusing the ear a regular, hypnotic rhythm, thus preventing

the sing-song effect of much iambic verse. Douglas also interrupts his rhyme scheme at times for emphasis. Notice the end of the first stanza in “Dead Men”:

Tonight the moon inveigles them
to love: they infer from her gaze
her tacit encouragement.

Tonight the white dresses and the jasmine scent
in the streets. I in another place
see the white dresses glimmer like moths. Come

to the west, out of that trance, my heart--

Douglas interrupts the meter and rhyme at the end the first stanza to emphasize the transition that occurs between the city and the western desert. The movement implied takes places in the poet’s mind--from his trance of memories of Cairo back to the battlefield. The single word, “Come,” violates the rhyme scheme and creates a stride-over, drawing attention to the transition, but the probable pause at the stanza break (perhaps causing the poem to be read as if the line were end-stopped--“Come.”) creates an interesting dynamic within the poem. “Come” beckons in both directions, simultaneously inviting the soldier and reader to explore the different world that lies west of Cairo and seducing the mind of the soldier back to the sensual city. The vision of “white dresses” invites the mind to recall more pleasant times; the poem invites the reader to investigate the scene of death; the poet implores himself to move beyond his reverie-- “out of that trance”--and face the inevitable realities of the soldier’s life.

The final stanza of “Dead Men” leaves clues to the previous trajectory of the poem, tempting the reader to review:

And the wise man is the lover
who in his planetary love revolves
without the traction of reason or time's control
and the wild dog finding meat in a hole
is a philosopher. The prudent mind resolves
on the lover's or the dog's attitude for ever.

We ask ourselves, what are the attitudes of the lover and dog? The attitude of the lover is clearly one of thoughtlessness, "without the traction of reason or time's control"--animal passion. The moon's encouragement is tacit--understood instinctively, without words or logic. War, it seems, is a fool's paradise, or at least the ignorant fool ends up being the wise man. Those who, like the lover, do not think, are also not burdened with a moral conscience. More importantly, the lover never sees the scenes of devastation and death, and so avoids the need to think about the dead. Meanwhile, the soldier must bear the burden of his knowledge of evil.

Why the dog is a philosopher might be more ambiguous. The dog also has knowledge, so to speak, of the scene of evil and death, but does not develop a conscience or pity inanimate flesh. In *Alamein To Zem Zem*. Douglas looks on the body of a soldier and reflects that the pity he feels for the dead is useless. The prudent mind, in other words, exercises pity only on the living, in the form of compassion and mercy. In Douglas's analogy, the dog enacts this philosophy of exorcising useless pity. The dog does not recognize the dignity of the bodies: "The human virtue round them/is a vapour tasteless to a dog's chops (ln. 17-18). The soldier, similarly, in order to remain functional and sane, should not allow himself to recognize the humanity of mere bodies, "an organism not capable of resurrection" (ln. 25-26). The dead men, the title characters, are forgotten, must be forgotten.

“Dead Men,” ironically, works through the problem of how *surviving* soldiers should look upon the bodies of the dead. Douglas’s answer might also be read as a rationalization for an increasing callousness in his own reactions, an explanation or apology for his casually “unpoetic” response to the otherwise unimaginable fragility of life and the senseless death of young men. His is a realist’s response translated by a poet. The poet, we might say, adopts a way of perceiving the ghastly landscape that allows him to continue functioning as a soldier. The dog must eat. According to Douglas, the soldier must fight. By denying his need to mourn the corpses as human beings, the poet can rationalize his lack of emotional response. This is an extremely cynical stance, perhaps a stance that Douglas needed to assume to continue fighting.

In a discussion of “Dead Men,” the “I” of Geoffrey Hill’s article, “I in Another Place: Homage to Keith Douglas,” enters the battle. The complexity and tension that surfaced in Douglas’s verse as a result of his participation in the warfare of the Western Desert, Hill argues, had its origin in the sense of alienation Douglas felt, first on the battlefield, later upon returning to a ‘civilization’ whose non-combatant members could not comprehend Douglas’s “new world,” a world where “the vegetation is of iron” and “the metal brambles have no flowers or berries” (“Cairo Jag,” CP 97). The contrast of city and battlefield also illustrates the juxtaposition of two ways of perceiving reality, requiring the poet to develop two conceptions of self, two “I”s with which to see the world.⁷ In the intersection of these two, it is easy to see the possibility of alienation, the potential for the poet to feel that one “I” or the other is the “I” in an Other’s place, and the composite man feeling at home in neither world. Hill does not go this far with his analysis of alienation, but what he says suggests a similar view of the poet’s split subjectivity. For Hill, the purpose of problematizing Douglas’s dual role as soldier-poet is to prove that focusing on Douglas’s war-related material need not necessarily lessen the value of his work nor pigeonhole Douglas as a poet of limited complexity or subtlety.

A full psychoanalytical study of Douglas's split subjectivity might yield rich rewards. A cursory comparison of the Jungian Shadow and Douglas's Bête Noire shows how accurately the Jungian model might describe Douglas's contradictory behavior and his premonition of a beast on his back. Douglas's obsession with death seems to spring from the subconscious desire to annihilate the *other* within himself and might also be described in Freudian terms through exploration of the Death drive and his desire to reinvent himself. In the introduction to *Meeting the Shadow*, Jeremiah Abrams and Connie Zweig give a simple summary of the ways we encounter and identify the shadow in everyday life:

The shadow goes by many familiar names: the disowned self, the lower self, the dark twin or brother in bible and myth, the double, repressed self, alter ego, id. When we come face-to-face with our darker side, we use metaphors to describe these shadow encounters: meeting our demons, wrestling with the devil, descent to the underworld, dark night of the soul, midlife crisis (Abrams, 3).

We see many of these very metaphors in Douglas's poetry and depicted in his artwork.⁸ The "Bête Noire" fragments show the most obvious images of the shadow, but many other poems show strong evidence of Jung's phenomenon operating. In "Devils," Douglas conjures the idea of an alliance of the "idiots of the mind" with "the demons talking in the air" (*CP* 88). "I am possessed,/the house whose wall contains the dark strife/the arguments of hell with heaven," he writes in "Landscape with Figures 3" (*CP* 104). Death occurs at the moment that man and shadow meet in "How to Kill" (*CP* 112). In his attempts at the "Bête Noire" poem, he comes close to meeting his shadow. The fragments of this late poem (February-March 1944) indicate that Douglas was close to developing an integrated personality. We are left to wonder at the result had Douglas been able to achieve this unity of creative being. It may have been an incredibly productive event, or might have resulted in a loss of the tension between opposites that sustains much of his work. In his article, "Redeeming Our Devils and Demons," Stephen A. Diamond summarizes the unification of Jungian self and shadow:

Jung's unifying notion of the shadow serves also to reconcile the sundering imposed upon us by the conflict of opposites. Facing and assimilating our shadows forces the recognition of a totality of being consisting of good and evil, rational and irrational, masculine and feminine, as well as conscious and unconscious polarities (Abrams 185).

Sustaining the feeling of an evil shadow requires the self to deny the existence of evil *within*, and what Douglas did was common in one way and uncommon in another. Most people grapple with their own negative qualities by projecting these traits onto other people or groups of people. Douglas did this, but projected the qualities he feared in himself on an imaginary beast instead of another person. Douglas was caught in a half-recognition of the shadow. That is, he recognized the projection as his creation, but continued to deny that those qualities were a part of his own psyche. The strength of this denial would be typical of someone with high moral standards and a sincere desire to be wholly good. Douglas battled to understand and to control his beast. Many witnesses testify to the extremes of his personality, indicating that he was not always successful.

The poems written in El Ballah hospital work increasingly towards the economy of language shown in “Gallantry,” and later perfected in “Sportsmen,” “*Vergissmeinnicht*,” and “How to Kill.” The abbreviated syntax of the latter three has advantages over the more extended phrasing of “Cairo Jag,” which seems to spend too long in preliminaries, the final stanza carrying most of the poem’s weight. Just as in “Dead Men,” it begins in the city then moves to the “I in another place”:

But by a day’s travelling you reach a new world
the vegetation is of iron
dead tanks, gun barrels split like celery
the metal brambles have no flowers or berries
and there are all sorts of manure, you can imagine
the dead, themselves, their boots, clothes and possessions

clinging to the ground, a man with no head
has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.

Here in the desert the dead are not so different from the living dead of Cairo, except that Douglas seems more disgusted by the decay of the city, all self-inflicted or posed--like the pathetic airs of a woman in the first stanza, Marcelle, mourning for a dead lover but able to transform herself for normal affairs. Many critics have guessed at the significance of the headless man with the trappings of another degenerate city. Graham points to the contrast between cities and battlefields (*KD* 186-87). Scammell thinks the dead man has somehow traded his life for the worthless trinkets of civilization (142). Mark Goldman emphasizes the irony that ordinary objects create when put in a place where the reader expects reverence for the dead (222). Jon Silkin agrees with Graham on the idea of contrast, adding that things like celery and chocolate point to the relative luxury and safety of the cities, and compares several similar details in Douglas's poetry and prose to illustrate the constant juxtaposition of the "alien" battlefield and the towns that become equally alienating to the soldier when he returns out of battle (Silkin, 8-9).

An earlier version of "Cairo Jag" included two sections that Douglas later cut. These add to the contrast of city and battlefield but expose Douglas's initial project in a more overt manner than he finally wanted. The voice in these excised sections sounds less detached from his fellow soldiers and the poet becomes a participant with feelings and opinions, unlike the rational and controlled subject of his final version. He sees "new ethics" and "fresh virtues" in the landscape of war, and even invokes the phrase "the noble dead," but then adds, more with shame than sarcasm, "whom we honour as companions with every indignity" (*CP* 137). Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, readers can find little evidence of irony in these abandoned sections.

There was certainly an aspect of Douglas's personality, not often shown to his literary peers, tending more to the proud warrior than the ironic poet. Honest critics can deny

neither aspect of his paradoxical voice. Sometimes he sounds more like Rupert Brooke than Wilfred Owen--more nationalistic sloganeer than pleading pacifist. We cannot dismiss this inconsistency as blatant hypocrisy, as mentioned much earlier, because, at different times throughout his adult life, Douglas spoke and acted with convincing sincerity in two personae--alternating between warrior and poet. Could he have been both, without tearing himself apart? Which was person and which was pose? Ultimately, the latter question becomes less important to an assessment of the poetry, but remains a perplexity when trying to judge the man.

Competing aspects of Douglas's personality and creative conscience do appear to have sustained a dialectic tension in his work. The permanence of this tension between world citizen and "Old Blue," between soldier and lover, pacifist and warrior, artist and officer, underlies what we might call the "consistency in ambivalence" of Douglas's personal and literary battle with that dark alter ego, the Bête Noire. Yet no one should be too quick to assume that the black beast was the condemned killer of "How to Kill." As readers of his literary legacy we might conclude too easily that Douglas had grown to hate the militant tendencies of his personality. This may be the defensible position when looking at his writings, but if the answer had been so simple for Keith Douglas, the tension would have disappeared much sooner. The possibility exists that the pressure to develop his creative potential, under the eyes of "father figures" like Blunden and Eliot, was just as much a burden to the young adventurer and hearty as the burden of moral conscience on the artist-scholar caught in the "total war" of ruthless men. Only immediately before his death, when publication and some measure of literary recognition were assured, did Douglas appear to develop an intellectually consistent self-concept, that of the poet.

The contrasts in his personality are played out in his poetry through the juxtaposing of city and battlefield, as in "Cairo Jag." The poet and lover are uncomfortable on the battlefield, fighting conscience and ruthlessness as much as the enemy. The soldier and

would-be aristocrat are likewise uncomfortable among the sights and smells of Cairo. The “jasmin scent in the streets” of “Dead Men” becomes “All this takes place in a stink of jasmin” in “Cairo Jag” (*CP* 96-97). The soldier sees the city as a place of rotting humanity, decayed morality, and despicable complacency. “But this stained white town/is something in accordance with mundane conventions--” For once, Douglas stops being enamored with the foreignness of Cairo and sees just another dirty city, nearly as tragic as the battlefield, yet not nearly as foreign. Cairo is “all as you have heard,” but the landscape of war is “a new world.”

Though the city and battlefield are contrasted, they ultimately tell the same story about the human condition and depravity. The wretchedness of the battlefield only echoes the stenches and disorder of the city. To know Cairo is to know all about death and futility. The scenes of war only allow an unobstructed view of what is always true. To perceptive observers, the waste and suffering in all places at all times matches that of the battlefield. G.S. Fraser pointed out in his Chatterton lecture that Douglas’s line “it is all one, all as you have heard . . .” means not only that all of the Cairo images cohere, but that “the squalor is universal, . . . that it is all one between Cairo and the Desert: Moral death and disorder match physical death and disorder” (Fraser 228). Douglas’s editing of the additional sections removed the correlative to this parallel--that mere *physical* death and disorder leaves the pretension of morality and high-mindedness intact, that somehow the soldier lives a more honorable existence than the disinterested city-dweller. This change in the poem also reflects Douglas’s editing of his own pose vis-a-vis the questions of a soldier’s moral righteousness. We are left to wonder whether the final pose was meant merely for his literary peers in Cairo,⁹ or if Douglas himself preferred the ambivalence of the final version. One might even argue that the original version offered *more* complexity, but by leaving it intact, Douglas would have risked having his positive rendering of soldiers seen as delusional militant posturing. As it is, “Cairo Jag” seems merely to offer images without any substantial attempts at resolution.

When considered carefully, Douglas's assertion that "it is all one" with the human condition, regardless of place, informs our view of the difference between Douglas's form of protest and that of his Great War predecessors. Douglas often sees death in war no differently than any other means of death--the bodies of dead soldiers are no more or no less heroic than any other corpse. The influence of Wilfred Owen becomes quite obvious in "The Trumpet," but Douglas's protest lacks one of the elements of Owen's. Both mock the glorification of death contained in the heroic language, traditions, and history of warfare. Both despise killing *pro patria*--for the sake of the fatherland--and object to senseless loss of life, but Douglas does not condemn the reasons for fighting. In his last letter to Blunden in early 1944, he still finds some purpose to the fighting: "For me, it is simply a case of fighting *against* the Nazi regime" (Douglas's emphasis, *PM* 152-53).

"The Trumpet" focuses on a single idea and coheres, with fewer digressions than many of Douglas's poems, but it could be questioned for its apparent simplicity. Nonetheless, it provides a starting point for a brief comparison of Douglas and Owen. Douglas begins by calling on Arcturus, the star that has been witness to countless battles throughout history:

O how often Arcturus
have you and your companions
heard the laughter and the distant shout
of the long tube a man sets to his mouth
crying that war is sweet, and the men you
see sleep after fighting will fight in the day before us?

With this question Douglas establishes a continuum from Homer and Horace to Owen and himself. The next three stanzas develop the idea that the rhetoric of the trumpet has

always accompanied men going to war. His last half line abbreviates the ending of Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est":

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori. (Owen, 1917)

with the curt epithet, "The trumpet is a liar" (*CP* 98). Douglas's poem never pretends to be as ambitious as Owen's, but captures the spirit of Douglas's attempt to remove irrelevancies from his poetry and to speak the truth plainly, without affecting contrived sentiments or "useless pity." Douglas's tone is matter-of-fact and unequivocal.

In the first and fourth stanzas of "The Trumpet," two small clues point to other possible connections between Owen and Douglas. A recurrent image in Douglas's poetry of war and the prose narrative, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, is that of bodies in repose--either of sleeping soldiers "waiting for their wounds" ("The Offensive I, *CP* 93) or corpses in peaceful attitudes. In "Dead Men," we see "sleepers who are condemned or reprieved," and compare "the men/you see sleep after fighting" in "The Trumpet" with Owen's "encumbered sleepers" in "Strange Meeting."¹⁰ When Douglas says, "the sky glistened/with a flight of bullets" (ln. 17-18), is he recalling "Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence," from Owen's "Exposure"? At least the tone and feeling of Owen's "shrill demented choirs of wailing shells" ("Anthem for Doomed Youth") is captured in Douglas's "... and hear, crouching, the air shriek/ the crescendo, expectancy to elation/violently arriving" (ln. 23-25). Both of these passages compare the sound of shellfire with the hypnotic calling of the trumpet--Owen's bugle calling dead boys home; Douglas's "Regimental Trumpeter Sounding in the Desert" seducing young men into battle.¹¹

The very next poem in Graham's ordering in *Complete Poems*, again shows evidence of Owen's influence on Douglas. The language and tone of "Gallantry" approaches Douglas's most mature form, and its last stanza recalls Owen's "The Last Laugh" (Owen 59). "Gallantry" centers around a joke the colonel tells over the radio during battle. We never hear the joke, but neither do the three "heroes" Douglas introduces. The first stanza introduces the regiment, communicating as a unit over the radio. The next three stanzas outline our three heroes:

The Colonel in a casual voice
spoke into the microphone a joke
which through a hundred earphones broke
into the ears of a doomed race.

Into the ears of the doomed boy, the fool
whose perfectly mannered flesh fell
in opening the door for a shell
as he had learnt to do at school.

Conrad luckily survived the winter:
he wrote a letter to welcome
the auspicious spring: only his silken
intentions severed with a single splinter.

Was George fond of little boys?
We always suspected it,
but who will say: since George was hit
we never mention our surmise.

The colonel to whom Douglas refers is no doubt based on Colonel Kellett, the commander of the Sherwood Rangers until he was killed during the time Douglas was convalescing. He and Douglas maintained a relationship of controlled animosity, but very likely had much in common. Kellett also appears in the first stanza of “Aristocrats,” and Douglas’s reaction to the news of his death shows that his feelings for “his colonel” were more complicated than even Douglas probably wanted to admit.¹² Here again we see Douglas’s ambivalence towards father figures. His conflicts with authority often ran parallel with his inability to trust people. His portrayal of the colonel in “Gallantry” reflects this ambivalence. Douglas does not protest against the actions of his superior officers, but subtly criticizes their nonchalance when dealing with the lives of young men. Douglas never blames the colonel for the deaths of the three heroes, but makes obvious the misguided nature of the “casual voice,” which the colonel misconstrues as gallantry. The colonel’s words fall on “dead” ears:

It was a brave thing the Colonel said,
but the whole sky turned too hot
and the three heroes never heard what
it was, gone deaf with steel and lead.

The young heroes literally do not *get* the joke. The colonel’s misplaced and outdated gallantry would be quaintly humorous, it seems, if the stakes were not so high. As it is, war itself gets the last laugh:

But the bullets cried with laughter,
the shells were overcome with mirth,
plunging their heads in steel and earth--
(the air commented in a whisper).

Compare this with the first stanza of Owen's "The Last Laugh":

‘O Jesus Christ! I’m hit,’ he said; and died.
Whether he vainly cursed, or prayed indeed,
The Bullets chirped--In vain! vain! vain!
Machine-guns chuckled,--Tut-tut! Tut-tut!
And the Big Gun guffawed. (Owen, 59)

Douglas makes use of the Great War tradition, but changes it by refusing to pretend that simple pacifism answers the immediate need of the soldiers. He only asks that if he and his peers must die, that they not be expected to risk their lives as a matter of sporting chance or to offer themselves as no more than the appropriate noble sacrifice. Douglas's message echoes Housman's observation: "Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose;/But young men think it is, and we were young" (197).

Douglas's clarity of purpose after participation in battle shows its effect through the absence of lyrical flourishes in his poetry. The removal of these "irrelevancies," as Douglas might have called them at the time, allows an economical attention to essence. He names no specific flower in "Desert Flowers," and does not dwell on the implicit contrast of fragile bloom and merciless landscape. The legacy of the Great War poets speaks for him:

Living in a wide landscape are the flowers--
Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying--
the shell and the hawk every hour
are slaying men and jerboas, slaying

the mind: but the body can fill
the hungry flowers and the dogs who cry words
at nights, the most hostile things of all.

This extended first sentence accomplishes a review of the relevant lines of Isaac Rosenberg's 1916 "Break of Day in the Trenches":

As I pull the parapets's poppy
To stick behind my ear.

...

Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;
But mine in my ear is safe--
Just a little white with dust

(103-104)

When Douglas continues, he again apologizes for his repetition. Apparently, he thinks the message bears repeating and hints that he has something to add:

But that is not new, Each time the night discards
draperies on the eyes and leaves the mind awake
I look each side of the door of sleep
for the little coin it will take
to buy the secret I shall not keep.

I see men as trees suffering
or confound the detail and the horizon.
Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing
of what the others never set eyes on.

The poet's awareness of brutalities becomes the central concern, but maintaining that awareness and writing about what the poet sees has an extreme cost -- "words . . . are the most hostile things of all." Death of men and death of a single man's imagination--slaying the mind--are paralleled. In fact, Douglas may have believed that losing one's

life was the cost of poetic vision, following the history of Rosenberg and Owen, both killed in the first war. He will not keep the secret for two reasons: poets sing and dead men forget. William Scammell points out a biblical allusion in the first line of the fourth stanza from Mark 8: 22-26 (185). In the biblical story, the sight of a blind man is restored in stages. Jesus lays hands on the man, and asks what he sees. He replies, “I see men as trees walking.” Before fully regaining his sight, though, the man must lay *his own* hands on his eyes. Just as Jesus can give the blind man only limited sight, Rosenberg, Owen, and Sassoon cannot see everything for Douglas. The poet sees clearly only by seeing for himself. This contention echoes Douglas’s assertion in his essay “Poets in this War,” that only front-line soldiers can be legitimate war poets.

Jon Silkin notes the reference to Virgil’s Charon, the aged boatman on Acheron (57). Charon will ferry across the river of woe only those souls upon whose lips the money for passage has been placed before burial. These passengers can never return to tell what they have seen in the underworld. Similarly, Jesus commands the former blind man not to tell his story. By proclaiming, “I will sing of what the others never set eyes on,” Douglas declares his intent to defy both Scripture and myth. He writes as if he were already dead, singing from the other side of the door. He has detached himself from the living and identified himself with the dead poets. He has lost human agency and must ask someone else to place a coin on his tongue. Scammell also equates the “little coin” with a bullet, “the currency of death” (185), but it seems just as likely that Douglas meant to confound the two allusions (Christ and Charon--heaven and hell) by asking that the coin be placed on his tongue--like a communion wafer--instead of between the lips, as Virgil would have it.

“Desert Flowers” shows a mature talent, but remains more subjective than some of the later poems and retains slight ambiguities. Of the four remaining poems I plan to discuss, the first three exemplify Douglas’s most warrior-like pose and were all written in the late spring of 1943, after the fighting in North Africa had ended. Graham says that

the fourth, “On a Return from Egypt,” represented Douglas’s “triumphant return to lyricism” (253). I will claim that this poem shows an integration of cynic and lyric and shows, as Douglas wished, a balanced style.

The poem that I have alternately called “Sportsmen” and “Aristocrats,” because it appears in two forms, was sent to Tambimuttu in July 1943 with the title “Aristocrats” (*CP* 139). Graham places the other version, “Sportsmen,” in the main chronology of *Complete Poems* and gives four reasons¹³ for his conclusion that “Sportsmen” is the final version. Except for the title and the last line, only very minor changes distinguish the two versions. Syntactical alterations in the third and fourth stanzas give “Sportsman” a more regular metric pattern, but nothing changes the main thrust of either version.

“Sportsmen” is arguably the central object in the debate over whether Douglas was a remorseless militant and would-be aristocratic horseman, or a practical minded realist who could both admire and abhor the varied aspects of his superiors and the divided loyalties of a soldier’s life. Those who take the former view perceive the poem as a mournful panegyric to the two aristocratic country gentlemen who were Douglas’s superiors in North Africa. Critics taking the latter view concede that “Sportsmen” is a kind of eulogy for Colonel E.O. Kellett and Lt Col. J.D. Player, but also see Douglas’s subtle disgust with their beliefs, and his sense of frustration that these lives were so willingly wasted.

Douglas attached a note to the version that Graham defends as the latest which reads: “Lt Col. J.D. Player, killed in Tunisia, Enfidaville, Feb. 1943, left £3000 to the Beaufort hunt, and directed that the incumbent of the living in his gift should be ‘a man who approves of hunting, shooting, and all manly sports, which are the backbone of the nation’” (*KD* 139). Thus, without directly ridiculing a man about whom he had ambivalent feelings, Douglas demonstrates to readers the patriotic and antiquated language of one of the sportsmen. The effect of Player’s statement complements Douglas’s purpose in the poem--to mourn the men while gently condemning their fatal

and arrogant ideology. Both Kellett and Player were killed while taking unnecessary chances during battle.

Douglas begins with a slightly deceptive metaphor, comparing the men to a gallant and well-bred war horse:

The noble horse with courage in his eye
clean in the bone, looks up at a shellburst:
away fly the images of the shires
but he puts the pipe back in his mouth.

The metaphor is deceptive because any true sportsman--or avid horseman, as Player was--would see the comparison as nothing less than high praise, but the undertone hints that the horse appears too noble, too courageous, too casual, all too naive. Though clear-eyed and brave, the horse is a stubbornly proud animal that can be trained to ignore danger, to become too comfortable in life-threatening situations. The horse might think that war is but a louder, bloodier version of polo or a fox-hunt. Only a loud noise calls him back to the battlefield from his daydreams of home, and he too nonchalantly puts the pipe back in his mouth.

The opening metaphor of the poem is completed with this ridiculous image--a horse with a pipe in its mouth. Most readers have likely decoded the metaphor before this point by considering the title, but the silliness remains to form a comment about the nonsensical bravado and unnecessary distraction of smoking a pipe during battle. Lt Col Player was heir to a cigarette fortune (*KD* 137) and the only picture of him in the Douglas biography shows him in an “attitude of unconcern” and smoking a pipe (*KD* 194).

Stanza two illustrates a scene from the fighting near Wadi Zem Zem and closely follows Douglas's depiction of the same event in *Alamein to Zem Zem*. Peter's comment illustrates the idiocy of this class of men and their complete failure to comprehend the seriousness of warfare:

Peter was unfortunately killed by an 88;
it took his leg off; he died in the ambulance.
When I saw him crawling, he said:
It's most unfair, they've shot my foot off.

Douglas mimics the ludicrous tone of the sportsmen's language by forcing the reader to ask if getting killed is ever *fortunate*. Even without the complete story, acute readers discern the grossly understated nature of Peter's remark. An 88 denotes the deadly 88 mm. German anti-aircraft gun, later adapted with devastating effect for use as an anti-tank weapon. In earlier drafts, a narrator's view of the wound--"it took his leg away in ragged shreds"--and two additional lines--"Peter, have you got a tourniquet on/No I suppose I ought to have really" (*KD* 200-201) -- made the situation too obvious. The reader only needs to know that the wound is more serious than Peter acknowledges. By having Peter complain that having his foot shot off is *unfair*, instead of awful or painful, Douglas again points to the sportsmen's misconception that war is merely a game with higher stakes, but retaining a need for a sporting sense of fair play.

The pivotal third stanza gives the best evidence that Douglas intended this poem to form a critique of the sportsmen's code, but that he nonetheless felt a loss in the death of his commanders and held on to a kind of admiration for their chivalrous heroism:

How then can I live among this gentle
obsolescent breed of heroes, and not weep?
Unicorns, almost. For they are fading into two legends
in which their stupidity and chivalry are celebrated;
the fool and the hero will be immortals.

The question of the first two lines makes three distinct rhetorical statements. First, it clarifies that *the poet* is not one of *them*, and could never attain their cool demeanor and their studied casual pose. Second, it insists that these men are truly heroes, but “obsolescent” ones, doomed to extinction. They are also gentle, aggressive in an athletic manner, but characteristically calm and non-violent.

This second statement requires an expanded explanation. Two incidents, one that Douglas surely knew about and another that he tells of in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, help illustrate this kind of gentle chivalry and sportsmanship. German soldiers captured J.D. Player, then still a major, when he unknowingly walked up to a British armoured car that happened to be “on loan” to the enemy. He was taken immediately to Rommel’s headquarters, where he was wined and dined by an enemy general and two staff officers he had known at Oxford. He later escaped by getting his Italian guards drunk, then reported that his captors were “disciplined, efficient and well turned out” (*KD* 176-77). From stories like this, we can appreciate that a kind of chivalry did, in fact, still exist in both armies. While no one should be fooled into believing that this type of treatment was the rule, a second incident shows that a similar ethic sometimes operated at a more personal and immediate level, not to mention at a lower level in the hierarchy. In *Alamein to Zem Zem*, Douglas and his tank crewmen are attempting to capture German prisoners when he attributes to himself an understandable emotion:

I tried to get the prisoners into a body by gesticulating with my useless rifle. To hurry a man up, I pointed a rifle at him, but he cowered to the ground, like a puppy being scolded, evidently thinking I was going to shoot him on the spot. I felt very embarrassed, and lowered the rifle: he shot away after his comrades as though at the start of a race. (*NBMW* 401)

Embarrassment might be a strange emotion for an unrepentant militant to feel in that situation. Douglas might have thought that sportsmanlike behavior was not completely naive, and perhaps more moral, than an approach to “total” war that would allow a soldier to shoot a man (Douglas uses the term “prisoner” to describe a number of soldiers that have not yet formally surrendered) in the back for the debatable reason that he may be the

man to kill him later, when tens of thousands of other enemy soldiers would have the same opportunity. Certainly, armies must kill enemy soldiers to win the kinds of battles being discussed, but the rationale for showing mercy whenever possible springs from the realization that men on both sides are enduring the same hardships and fears, and that the conflicting ideologies which define them as enemies are weighed on a political scale and unfortunately have little to do with individual human beings. Douglas himself states this case well:

But it is exciting and amazing to see thousands of men, very few of whom have much idea why they are fighting, all enduring hardships, living in an unnatural, dangerous, but not wholly terrible world, having to kill and to be killed, and yet at intervals moved by a feeling of comradeship with the men who kill them and whom they kill, because they are enduring and experiencing the same things. It is tremendously illogical . . . (*Alamein to Zem Zem*, NBMW 381-82).

Keith Douglas could loathe the Nazi regime and still show compassion and pity for the German soldier. Moral philosophy offers a rationalization for this apparent inconsistency by distinguishing between *jus ad bellum*, the justice of war and *jus in bello*, justice in war.¹⁴ This distinction, which Douglas appeared to understand instinctively, explains the soundness of his disposition. Douglas understood the humanity and ant-like insignificance of front-line soldiers,¹⁵ but also saw clearly their moral culpability within the larger context of nationalist politics. At the beginning of *Alamein to Zem Zem*, he comments,

We talk in the evening, after fighting, about the great and rich men who cause and conduct wars. They have so many reasons of their own that they can afford to lend us some of them. There is nothing odd about their attitude, They are out for something they want, or their Governments want, and they are using us to get it for them. Anyone can understand that. (NBMW 381)

Can we point to this comment, and others like it, and see both a cynic and a realist, and perhaps even detect a mercenary spirit of collaboration with those in power? Yes, but more than likely this would be simplifying Douglas's multi-sided perception. Irony absents itself from his later pledge to fight against the Nazis,¹⁶ and the record of his behavior in combat testifies to his compassion for ally and enemy alike.¹⁷

The third statement made by the rhetorical question of the first two lines (Stanza 3) allows two readings that simultaneously express similar feelings. Douglas asks, "How can I . . . not weep?" Does he intend to say "I *do* weep and how could I not" or does he question himself: "why are you not weeping?" Whether he is explaining a show of emotion or expressing amazement at his own *lack* of emotion, the result is similar, but the latter leaves room for more ambivalence. In either case, he admits that strong emotion would be appropriate, that it would be reasonable in his situation to weep. However, if he thinks it proper to weep, but cannot, perhaps his indifference betrays a conflicted dual response--regret that these men lost their lives, but a suspicion that somehow they deserved their fate.

The mixed feelings of "Sportsmen" are stated most openly in the second half of the third stanza with the counter-pleading of stupidity/chivalry and fool/hero. If we think Douglas sincerely wished to balance his assessment of the sportsmen, then we must conclude that he still believed in heroes and chivalry, because they are the positive terms. Otherwise, we must assume that he intended an undercurrent of resentment by *equating* the terms he chose. With respect to Douglas, it is not inconceivable to credit him with the dual intent that appears throughout the poem. Only with the last stanza, after establishing a clear ambivalence, so to speak, does Douglas indulge his uncertain respect and admiration of "this gentle obsolescent breed of heroes":

These plains were a cricket pitch
and in the hills the tremendous drop fences
brought down some of the runners, who
under these stones and earth lounge still
in famous attitudes of unconcern. Listen
against the bullet cries the simple horn.

This final stanza comes close to unqualified affection, and may explain why some critics have underestimated the balanced critique of gallantry which dominates the first three stanzas. In the fourth stanza Douglas judges the aristocrat sportsmen in accordance with their code and their naïve sense of heroism and honor. Douglas, in a sense, gives in to the mindset of his regimental peers. The most charitable reading would allow that he had come to value equally their self-sacrifice, regardless the reason, and his own sense of intellectual integrity--a balance of cynic and soldier.

If “Sportsmen” provides the central focus for the discussion of whether Douglas admired the chivalrous attitudes of sportsmen, then “*Vergissmeinnicht*” provides the site for a related argument over Douglas’s degree of emotional involvement as expressed in his poetry, and his intentional control of language to limit sentimentality. Proper assessment of Douglas’s reputation hinges on an understanding of this argument (it amounts to more than a discussion¹⁸). To gain insight to the extremes of opinion regarding this poem, I refer back to some of the key critics mentioned in chapter two. Despite the fact the “*Vergissmeinnicht*” is one of Douglas’s most widely known poems, Ted Hughes never directly comments on it, but Ian Hamilton is again in the forefront:

A poem like “*Vergissmeinnicht*,” which has a powerful plot and is probably Douglas’s most famous “active service” poem, seems finally rather prim and frozen in its formality. It is shoddy in a number of key places--the “paper eye”, “burst stomach like a cave”, “the swart flies”, “the entry of a demon”--and there is a constant, debilitating pressure to make fable: the facts seem wrenched and cerebrally reconsidered; rhyme words clot uncomfortably and there are irritating inversions and compressions (Hamilton 62).

Compare Hamilton’s analysis with Scammell’s direct rejoinder:

The supposed shoddiness of “*Vergissmeinnicht*” is asserted but not demonstrated. The observation that “there is a constant . . . pressure to make fable” is perfectly true, as it is of Rosenberg, but again Hamilton fails to show how or why this should be seen as “debilitating.” Fable debilitates when the moral or conceptual scheme dictates to and impoverishes local detail “*Vergissmeinnicht*,” however, is as convincing at every level as Rosenberg’s “Louse Hunting” or “Break of Day in the Trenches” (WS 201-02).

and George Fraser's contradictory view of specific syntax:

Douglas, I think, never wrote a more skilful poem than this; or one in which his skill is more modestly subdued to the total effect he is aiming at. What gives us the effect, for instance, in the first stanza, of the tanks lumbering bumpily and relentlessly on is a kind of wheeling motion in the stanza itself, repetitions and a concealed rhyme: [quotes first stanza]. What saves the stanza about the dead soldier's appearance from being merely repellent is, again, the deliberate formality of syntax and the choice of a literary adjective--"the swart flies," not "the black flies," and an objective precision of statement, without emotional commentary, that gives an effect of icy pity [quotes fifth stanza]. And in the last stanza the effect of aesthetic distance, of the whole experience being held in control, is clinched by the eighteenth-century antithesis: [quotes final sentence] (Fraser 231-32).

Considering the direct correlation of Hamilton's and Fraser's points, and noticing that Fraser's comments were given first, in the 1956 Chatterton Lecture, it is difficult not to read Hamilton's comments as a bit contrived.¹⁹ However, the point of this comparison was to show the difficulty of reconciling such extremely divergent views. Where Hamilton sees rhyme words clotting uncomfortably, Fraser sees constructive repetition and concealed rhyme. When Hamilton finds shoddiness in the fifth stanza, Fraser finds a "deliberate formality of syntax, and an objective precision of statement." Where one man discovers prim and frozen formality, another finds an intentional absence of subjective emotion that "gives an effect of icy pity." With such complete disagreement from early, guiding commentaries, most subsequent readers have felt compelled to take a side. It becomes nearly impossible to combine the pros and cons in order to forge a balanced composite analysis. Thus, the debate over "Vergissmeinnicht" mirrors in microcosm the debate over Keith Douglas and his poetry.

In the Preliminary to his Great War classic, *Undertones of War*, Edmund Blunden begins his long struggle to make sense of his war experience by declaring, "I must go over the ground again" (12). Douglas put his example to use when setting the scene for "Vergissmeinnicht":

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone
returning over the nightmare ground
we found the place, and found
the soldier sprawling in the sun

The frowning barrel of his gun
overshadowing. As we came on
that day, he hit my tank with one
like the entry of a demon.

The poet tells us immediately that his confrontation with the dead man was emotionally significant--a nightmare in a place he well remembers. Laboring the fact of his emotional response would be a waste of words, a violation of the strict economy of expression that the poet holds up as his ideal. He temporally displaces the violence and defines his own subjective distance by implying that combatants no longer control the scene, including, we assume, the poet. The "sprawling" corpse lacks the fastidious composure of the "lounging" attitudes of the sportsmen, but still shows Douglas's preoccupation with the doll-like arrangement of dead bodies.²⁰ The facial cast of the soldier's gun works perfectly to suggest both the vanquished status of the soldier and the impotence of the dead lover. The unfortunate coincidence of lover and soldier inhabiting a single body overshadows the poem.

What Fraser calls the "wheeling motion" of the first stanza, comparing the resultant rhythm to the relentless lumbering of a tank, can be otherwise interpreted without condemning the density of rhyming and alliteration as Hamilton does. Strong stresses occurring on each "gone" of the first line establish a rhythm which forces an emphasis on "nightmare" because it delays the expected alliteration and consonantal rhyming of gone/gone/ground. The quick rhyming of the first "found" of line three then ties all three lines together--gone/gone/ground/found/found--despite, or perhaps because of, the

irregular meter. The cohesiveness of these lines sets them off. We arrive breathless, or tongue-tied, at the end of the third line and are then presented with the pitiful image of our central character, set apart from the scene. The entire effect of the first stanza is to compress our initial panorama into a sharp focus on the object of the subsequent meditation. The almost imperceptibly interrupted monotony of the rhythm and rhyming mimic a soldier-poet's struggle to concentrate on something more significant than appearances.²¹ The slightly numbing repetition imitates the constructive monotony of a pensive gaze--the poet's written reverie.

The poet emphatically directs this gaze further with a single word at the beginning of the third stanza:

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil
the dishonoured picture of his girl
who has put: *Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht*
in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content,
abased, and seeming to have paid
and mocked at by his equipment
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

Ambiguities mark these two quatrains. The “dishonoured picture of his girl” could have several possible meanings. Has the picture itself been obscenely defaced or splattered with blood and dirt or is the girl dishonoured because her lover failed as a soldier? The ambiguity seems intentional, and relevant. Does failure as a soldier equate to a loss of masculinity? Does a society value the reputation of its army more than the lives of its soldiers? Does dying in defeat mean something different from giving your life for victory? Do all soldiers die in vain, or only the losers? Does war itself dishonor them

all? Douglas offers no answers, but records the violent violation of intimacy and brings such troubling questions to the surface.

The ambiguity of the fourth stanza seems less intentional and perhaps results more from phrasing that is grammatically awkward. We initially assume that “we see . . . with content” and he--the dead soldier--is abased, but our assumptions, and not the syntax, provide this apparent clarity. Douglas wants to deny what he knows are irreverent and insensitive emotions about the dead man. He retains deniability of personal emotion by first identifying himself with the more comfortable group pronoun, “we.” These feelings are not his alone and are thus possibly not his at all. “Almost” lends itself to almost any interpretation. We are *almost* content and why are we not wholly content? More denial of callous sentiments? For what has the soldier paid, and with what has the soldier paid? His life for *his* content? It seems no critic has even considered that “content” might refer to the substance of the man--that Douglas has begun to see something *inside* the shell of the unspecified “enemy soldier.” Such a reading almost works.

The poet completely relinquishes individual subjectivity in the final two stanzas. He assumes the perspective of the soldier’s girl in the fifth stanza. Douglas sympathizes with the girl, thereby acknowledging his own pity for her and the dead soldier:

But she would weep to see today
how on his skin the swart flies move;
the dust upon the paper eye
and the burst stomach like a cave.

For here the lover and killer are mingled
who had one body and one heart.
And death who had the soldier singled
has done the lover mortal hurt.

Lover and killer come together in the final stanza, and death does not discriminate between the two. Also, perhaps the self and the Other of the poet's personality collide, always with the shadow of death watching over. Douglas smoothly projects his own two egos--ideal and shadow--into the imagined duality of the soldier, realizing that in death the two must meet and reconcile. Douglas could even be identifying himself with death itself. Douglas may have been the killer, either literally or figuratively, through his participation as a combatant. He wanted only to kill a nameless enemy soldier, but realized his mistake too late. Douglas has begun to see his enemy's personality, as well as his own, as an integrated whole. The soldier is singled out for death, but is also "singled"--unattached to either his girl back home or the other side of his self--by his killer, who sees *only* the soldier. The poet also wants to purge the black beast from his own personality, not realizing that this alter ego is a repressed side of himself.

Linda Shires, in her chapter on Douglas in *British Poetry of the Second World War*, identifies the sides of the dialectic tension in "*Vergissmeinnicht*" as Mars and Eros--what remains of the soldier, his gun and his girl. She parallels this opposition with Douglas's internal struggle to discover a unified self. Shires says that "*Vergissmeinnicht*" marks "the climax of Douglas' movement towards welding two sides of himself and integrating his personal struggles with history" and "the culmination of that development towards a greater humanity" (Shires 130, 135). Shires assertion forms a neat answer and treats Douglas charitably, but does not weigh very heavily the irony of Douglas's request to "Simplify me when I'm dead." "*Vergissmeinnicht*" does seem to register Douglas's conscious *recognition* of this duality within himself, but whether he accomplished an internal reconciliation and developed an integrated personality prior to his death remains to be debated. Douglas's attempt to understand the battle between lover and killer in himself creates a subcurrent in one of the last poems he wrote before leaving Egypt.

When read consecutively, as they appear in *Complete Poems*, "*Vergissmeinnicht*" and "How to Kill" form a coherent study of death, moral culpability, the subjectivity of

soldiers, and the difficulty of reconciling violent action with the killer's pity for the men this violence effects.

In "How to Kill," the poet assumes the perspective of a sniper²² to meditate on the detached, aesthetic interest of the killer and the cold nature of his response to death. Douglas again recognizes the complex humanity of the victim by acknowledging the subjectivity of "the soldier who is going to die" (ln 8):

Under the parabola of a ball,
a child turning into a man,
I looked in the air too long.
The ball fell in my hand, it sang
in the closed fist: *Open Open*
Behold a gift designed to kill.

Now in my dial of glass appears
the soldier who is going to die.
He smiles, and moves about in ways
his mother knows, habits of his.
The wires touch his face: I cry
NOW. Death, like a familiar, hears

and look. Has made a man of dust
of a man of flesh. This sorcery
I do. Being damned, I am amused
to see the centre of love diffused
and the waves of love travel into vacancy.
How easy it is to make a ghost.

The killer feigns detached reticence. The soldier-poet meets his shadow in the form of the killer, but understands that simultaneously to accept his role as killer and to consider the moral responsibility of killing he must accept damnation. Once he accepts that he is damned, he can allow himself the amusement of an aesthetic view of death. Still, Douglas's obvious irony makes clear the unease of the poet with this alliance of poet and Pandora.²³ We can almost hear the laughter of Douglas's 1942 "Devils":

Only within they make their noise;
all night against my sleep, their cries.

Outside the usual crowd of devils
are flying in the clouds,

•

Inside the unsubstantial wall
these idiots of the mind can't hear
the demons talking in the air
who think my mind void. That's a

There'll be an alliance of devils if it fall. (CP 88)

Douglas realized by 1943 that the devils were all within his mind, although the alliance takes place in "How to Kill," the poet still refused to let evil dominate his personality. Back in Britain in late 1943, he remained guardedly hopeful despite the premonition of death that continued to look over his shoulder.²⁴

The control and syntactical economy of the first three stanzas of “How to Kill” approach mastery, but the success of the ending largely depends on a more comprehensive understanding of Douglas’s obscure metaphysical metaphors. Such an understanding cannot be gained from an isolated reading of this poem. The ending fails to cohere and, therefore, much of the force and momentum of the first three-fourths of the

poem is lost. This nearly brilliant effort staggers to an emphatic but somewhat diminished conclusion:

The weightless mosquito touches
her tiny shadow on the stone,
and with how like, how infinite
a lightness, man and shadow meet.

They fuse. A shadow is a man
when the mosquito death approaches. (CP 112)

The last poem Douglas wrote,²⁵ "On a Return from Egypt," indicates that Douglas had decided to acknowledge the soldier-killer, but pay more attention to the lyric poet:

To stand here in the wings of Europe
disheartened, I have come away
from the sick land where in the sun lay
the gentle sloe-eyed murderers
of themselves, exquisites under a curse,
here to exercise my depleted fury.

The poet confirms that the death he wrote of in his desert war poems included death of the Other within the self. The suggestion of puns on exercise (exorcise) and fury (Furies) implies that he felt obligated to participate in the coming battle for Europe despite his diminished will to fight, but that he also wished to rid himself of the evil spirit which he felt clinging to his back--the bête noire. This final poem shows that Douglas had found a way to balance cynic and lyric; amid the tumult and horror of war, Douglas had found a separate peace within. Though not quite dormant, the soldier within him had been subdued by his return to a cooler climate, allowing the poet a chance to invoke some romantic images, however colorless.

For the heart is a coal, growing colder
when jewelled cerulean seas change
into grey rocks, grey water fringe,
sea and sky altering like a cloth
till colour and sheen are gone both:
cold is an opiate of the soldier.

And all my endeavors are unlucky explorers
come back, abandoning the expedition;
the specimens, the lilies of ambition
still spring in their climate, still unpicked:
but time is all I lacked
to find them, as the great collectors before me

Still, the poem does not represent a complete return to his old forms. Perhaps the cynic could again learn to see the color, given time, but the tone sounds more resigned than hopeful, and the final stanza leaves doubt and death as the only constants.

The next month, then, is a window
and with a crash I'll split the glass.
Behind it stands one I must kiss,
person of love or death
a person or a wraith,
I fear what I shall find.

Finally, Douglas decides to split the glass, to break through the metaphorical lens which has been a constant image in his poems and which has served to distance the poet from the objects of his inspection, preventing his emotional participation within the verse. Did

Douglas meet his shadow beyond the lens? The answer could also form an aphorism consistent with Douglas's approach to war poetry: only the dead poet knows.

Had Douglas survived the war, we would be able to determine whether these last few poems demonstrated the limits of his potential. At least it is probable that he would have been able to clarify and focus some of his metaphysical metaphors; others were intentionally ambiguous and would have suffered with simplification. That Douglas remains so enigmatic testifies more to his complexity and subtlety than to any incomprehensibility in his poetry.

A definitive judgment of Douglas seems unlikely, perhaps undesirable. I have attempted to show that an appreciation of his poetry need not rely on a comprehensive understanding of his character, but that such an understanding of the man lends credibility to the irony and ambiguity that can be read in many of his poems. The authors of negative appraisals often accuse Douglas of a detached emotional perspective, a "stiff-lipped reticence"; only a few have cited Douglas for a lack of technical mastery. Douglas's sensitivity shows itself, almost to excess, as an ironic negative capability. He could not afford the emotional cost of outright pity in an atmosphere of violent death.

Clearly, the critical dialogue on Douglas needs to find a center in which more readers attempt to reconcile the highly divergent opinions previously expressed. When such an extreme opposition develops, few participants in the dialogue remain acceptably objective--claims tend to exaggeration. More moderate assessments of the poetry would greatly increase the chances for Douglas's work to be judged without undue bias. I return to "Simplify me when I'm dead" to illustrate the poet's desire to be judged fairly:

Through that lens see if I seem
substance or nothing: of the world
deserving mention or charitable oblivion

not by momentary spleen
or love into decision hurled,
leisurely arrive at an opinion.

Those who wish to dismiss the poetry because they see an enthusiastic militant behind it may be surprised and intrigued to find a deeply considered battle of conscience raging within the poet and the poetry. Understanding the poet helps illuminate the ambivalence in the poetry, but the poetry and the poet should be judged separately. Douglas also understood his shortcomings, but pleaded for his poetry. In a piece of late juvenilia, “The Deceased” (1940), he makes his case:

You who God bless you never sunk so low
censure and pray for him that he was so;
and with his failings you regret the verses
the fellow made, probably between curses,
probably in the extremes of moral decay,
but he wrote them in a sincere way:
and seems to have felt a sort of pain
to which your imagination cannot attain.

Keith Douglas felt a wide range of emotion and experienced crises of conscience, but he avoided conspicuous emotion in his verse. He did not offer his own sentiments, but leads readers to their own through the dialogue between self and shadow, ego and other, soldier and poet. Without declaring a certain position, his poetry benefits its audience by locating and emphasizing the ambiguity within mortal situations. He found it unnecessary to put the pity in the poetry, but trusted his readers, being human, to feel pity based on the descriptions of “true things” he offered.

NOTES

1 Unless otherwise annotated, all verse quotations and datings are from those versions given in Desmond Graham's edition, *Complete Poems*, 1978. Graham does include variants at the back of the text. Use of these variants will also be noted. The commentary on the poetry is intended to be read hand-in-hand with the *Complete Poems*.

2 Compare Douglas "smoothing his pale hair/with automatic ecstasy." to Eliot "She smoothes her hair with automatic hand" (*The Wasteland*, III, ln. 255).

3 British Museum Add. MSS. 53773, in Coleman, 731.

4 In Barry Webb's biography of Blunden, the case for Blunden's influence on Douglas is stated unequivocally: "Though Douglas was considered an *enfant terrible* by several of his masters, Edmund found that 'he held no terrors' and considered that 'he should be a brilliant performer in the English Schools.' Douglas for his part found Edmund virtually the only figure of authority in his life for whom he had both affection and respect." Barry Webb, *Edmund Blunden; A Biography* New Haven: Yale UP, 1990.

5 Linda Shires, for one, in *British Poetry of the Second World War*, understands the ambivalence of Douglas's poetry, but may overestimate his reverence for what she calls "the romantic tradition of great warriors" (115). She adds that Douglas despaired at the "waning of aristocratic honour."

6 His boastful comments after signing up for military service when the war broke out do not seem at all out of the ordinary for a lovesick 19 year-old. On the other hand, I am more tempted to treat literally his insistence that he would not survive the war. His sense of doom was part of a consistent theme, beginning with his earliest poetry and ending with his last written line, "I fear what I shall find" (CP 122)

7 Thomas G. Bowie explores the relationships between the multiple facets of personal and public narrative voices, of historical view and autobiographical perspective and the "intersection between personal and cultural modes of interpretation" in "An I for an Eye: Edmund Blunden's War." *War, Literature, & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*. 5.2 (1993), 21-47.

8 See ink line drawing for "The Prisoner," reproduced in *KD*, 119, and Douglas's sketches for the cover of *Bête Noire*, *KD*, 241

9 "Cairo Jag" was first published in *Personal Landscape*, the Cairo periodical edited by Lawrence Durrell, Robin Fedden, and Bernard Spencer. 2.2 (1944) p. 11. "Vergissmeinnicht" and "Enfidaville" appeared in the same issue.

10 At the same time, no one should overlook Owen's brilliant use of the double meaning of "sleepers," both to denote the groaning of timbers in the dugouts of the First World War trenches and to introduce the "sleeping" bodies groaning under the encumbrance of death. Owen's Dantesque vision animates the dead more than Douglas would ever allow.

11 Douglas published “The Trumpet” in the *Times Literary Supplement* under the title “The Regimental Trumpeter Sounding in the Desert” (26 June 1943, p. 310., cited from *CP*, 137).

12 Kellett was killed while standing up in the turret of his tank shaving. Graham describes Douglas’s reaction upon reading of the colonel’s death in a newspaper while sitting at a café in Tel Aviv as one of “both incredulity and loss,” then quotes Douglas’s own description of his reaction: “It was impossible to realize it. The whole moment and everything in it—the coloured tables, the sun glare on the pavements, the white houses and the morning pedestrians—seemed suddenly a part of a dream” (*KD*, 194-95).

13 Graham defends the autograph copy on which Douglas had noted that Lt. Col. Player, one of the “Sportsmen,” had died in Feb. 1943. Graham thinks this incorrect dating (Player was killed on 24 April) is one proof that this version is later. Three other reasons are given for his conclusion: the letterhead of the MS, the metrically more regular third stanza, and what he considers the more precise title (139). The same conclusion could be reached based solely on the versions themselves.

14 At the beginning of his chapter, “The Crime of War,” Michael Walzer briefly outlines this distinction: “The moral reality of war is divided into two parts. War is always judged twice, first with reference to the reasons states have for fighting, secondly with reference to the means they adopt. The first kind of judgment is adjectival in character: we say that a particular war is just or unjust. The second is adverbial: we say that the war is being fought justly or unjustly” (Walzer 21). This second kind of judgment, *jus in bello*, can be applied to the actions of individual men in wartime situations calling for moral judgments.

15 Douglas even uses the simile of ant communities to describe the activity in the staging areas for the battle of Alamein (*Alamein to Zem Zem*, *NBMW* 383).

16 Douglas’s letter to Blunden, quoted earlier in chapter 3: “For me, it is simply a case of fighting *against* the Nazi regime” (*PM* 153).

17 Graham and Scammell both cite instances where Douglas showed more than professional concern for his subordinates, and Graham tells that Douglas practiced his German by talking with prisoners and even received instruction on the Luger during a “shooting match” with a group of German prisoners (*KD* 171).

18 William Scammell answers Ian Hamilton’s negative review of “*Vergissmeinnicht*” with this kind of language: “The indictment is compounded of moral smugness, falsification of the record, and critical ineptitude, as various critics have pointed out . . . To . . . is culpably to distort the poetry to fit a preconceived thesis based on a selective and misleading account of Douglas’s life” (*WS* 201-202).

19 Hamilton’s comments first appeared in 1964 in *London Magazine* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, as reviews of Hughes’s edition of *Selected Poems* (*WS* 200).

20 Two of the choices Douglas offered for the title of his campaign narrative (posthumously titled *Alamein to Zem Zem*) were “Anatomy of Battle” and “Anatomy of a Battle” (*PM* 147).

21 Douglas reflects in the first paragraph of *Alamein to Zem Zem* : “When I could order my thoughts I looked for more significant things than appearances; I still looked--I cannot avoid it--for something decorative, poetic or dramatic” (*NBMW* 381).

22 Douglas titled a slightly different version of this poem “The Sniper” (*CP* 141).

23 The poem certainly plays on the Pandora myth, which, along with the fact that only female mosquitoes are able to pierce the flesh, might explain the gendering of the mosquito as female. The myth operates most obviously in the first stanza, when the ball, which represents a bullet or an artillery shell, sings in the *closed* fist and beguiles the man to open his hand to behold a precious gift. Man holds plagues innumerable in his own hands, the poet implies. The only consolation in Pandora’s box is Hope, one of the only positive emotions Douglas mentions in his letter to J.C. Hall (see chapter 2).

24 Chapter 9 of Graham’s biography gives abundant evidence of Douglas’s mixed emotions during preparations for the European theater. As always, Douglas exhibited expectations of death along with hope for the future.

25 Graham places “On a Return from Egypt” last in the chronology of Douglas’s *completed* poems.

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